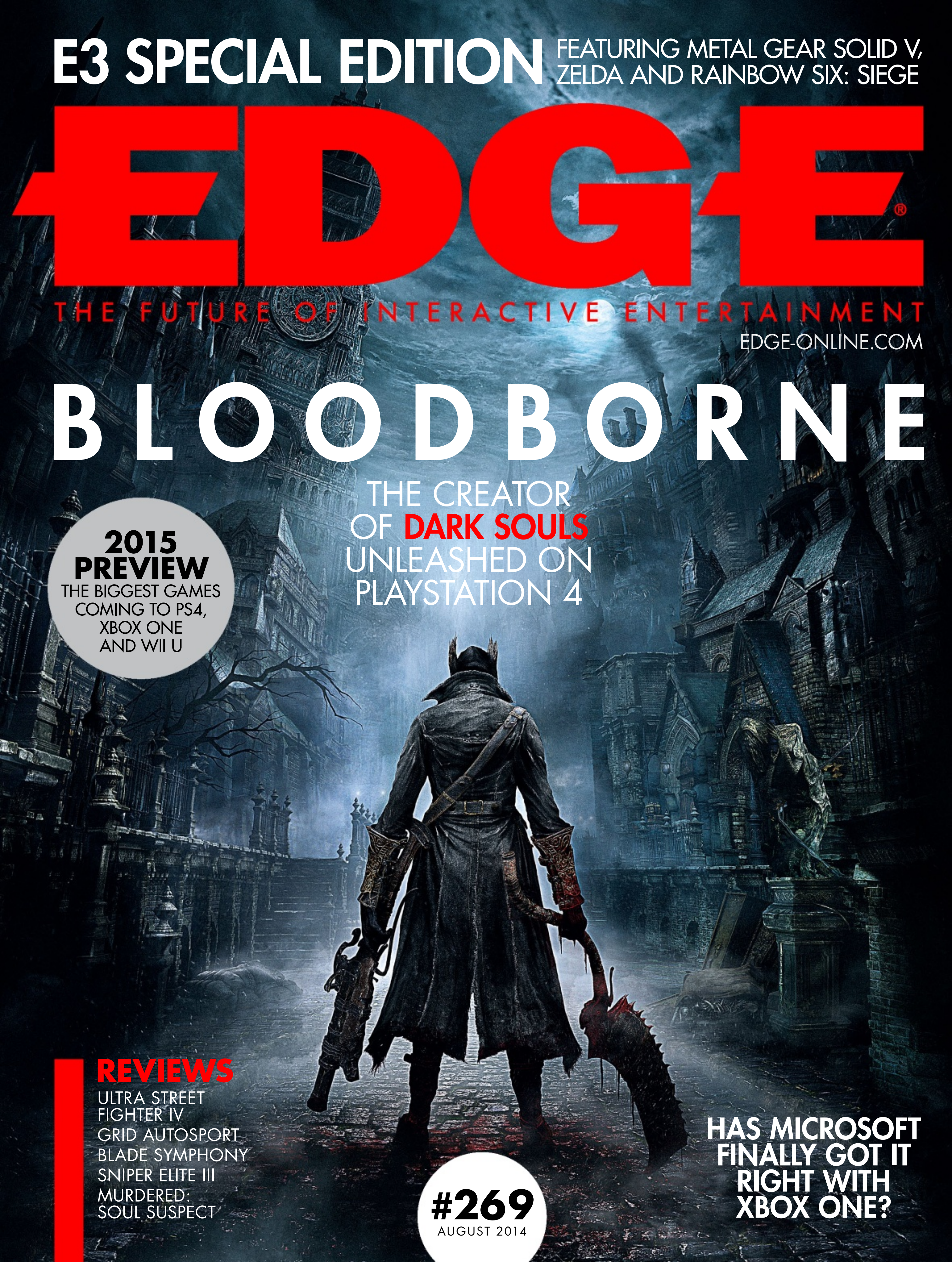
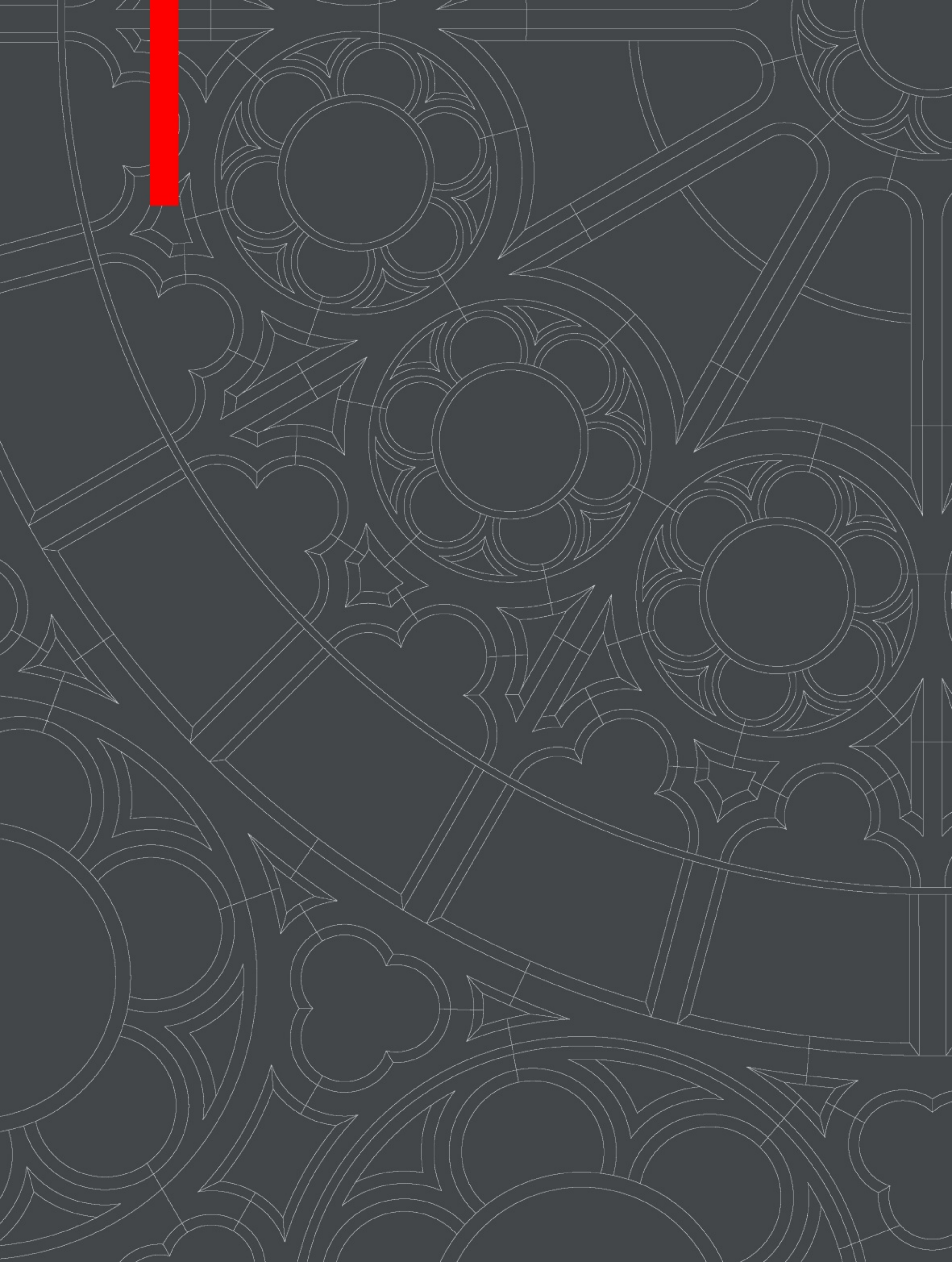

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AUGUST 2014
HAS MICROSOFT FINALLY GOT IT RIGHT WITH XBOX ONE?



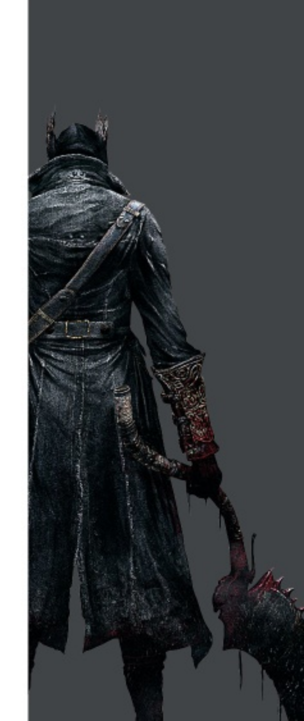
If E3 represents mainstream gaming, we're doing OK



When E3 rolls around each year, the same tired old whinges emerge from the same tired old self-appointed arbiters of taste. E3 doesn't represent the true innovators working within videogames today, they say; rather, it is the epitome of all that is wrong with an industry that never tires of telling the world how many billions of dollars in revenue it generates each year. To all that, we say: bullshit. Yes, when videogames were manufactured on cartridges at enormous expense, a visit to CES, which was videogames' annual showcase before E3 arrived, laid bare the sort risk aversion that swamped 16bit consoles with a torrent of lame, licensed, production-line dross. But time has moved on, not least because of the transformative power of digital distribution. For obvious reasons, E3 2014 didn't provide anything as seismic as last year's PS4 triumph, but as an event at which to assess the game industry's health, it was hardly short on returns.

This year Microsoft and Sony, in particular, gave an even greater emphasis to the creations of indie outfits, putting them on stage alongside big-budget productions from 400-strong teams. Mesmerising games such as *Ori And The Blind Forest* and *No Man's Sky* weren't given pride of place by platform holders because of the size of their creators' marketing budgets – because their creators don't have things like marketing budgets. These games made it instead thanks to the enthusiasm, dedication and talents of their creators, which is precisely as it should be.

The videogame industry offers plenty of things to rail at, but E3 2014 was a weak target. There was no shortage of window-rattling gunplay and explosions among this year's lineup, but it took no effort at all to find more diverse options among experiments with asymmetrical multiplayer modes, virtual reality, free-to-play models and a clutch of NFC toys from Nintendo. As always, we try to approach all of these things – including cover game *Bloodborne*, which kicks off our 40-page E3 Hype section – with an open mind. It's a much better starting point than a lazy sneer.





104

games



Hype at E3



54

Play



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#269

sections

AUGUST 2014

Knowledge

Dispatches

Features



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Has Microsoft finally got it right with Xbox One?

Microsoft opens **E3 2014** on a positive note, promising that it really is all about games

The seasonal slugfest where old plotlines end and new ones begin is seldom short of comeuppance, whether it was Nintendo's Wii U debut floundering in a fight against *Watch Dogs* and *Halo 4* back in 2012, or Microsoft's catastrophic Xbox One policies losing out to Sony's simple PS4 message in 2013. But last year's bloodbath between Sony and Microsoft did not deliver so dramatic a sequel. The big three played to a draw of sorts, with Microsoft distinguishing itself, at last putting an end to its year of hell with a show that was deferential and humble, if short on surprises.

With a widely expected return to core gaming values, new Xbox boss Phil Spencer addressed Xbox players current and lapsed, standing among the crowds on the theatre floor and thanking them for the feedback that has so clearly shaped the direction of the console. The notion of Xbox One as an all-in-one media box was gone, the "power of the cloud" became the much gamier "dedicated servers", and Kinect was as much an afterthought on stage as it has been in developers' hands over the past 12 months.

Spencer promised togetherness "at an incredible time in our industry", and for a moment it seemed Microsoft was on the verge of a change of stance that could, in better times, have signalled a conference full of seismic shocks. But instead came a reminder of how the past 12 months have depleted Xbox's vision and shredded its creator's nerve.

This was not a Microsoft proud to talk "all about the games", but one afraid to show anything else. So toxic are Microsoft favourites like Kinect and multimedia convergence that they just weren't mentioned at all. It gave the show a breathless pace that robbed the key games of their chance to shine. Headliners like this year's *Call Of Duty*, *Forza* and *Fable* were followed by the borderline retro – and clearly leagues ahead of the usual HD remaster – *Halo: The Master Chief Collection*. 343 Industries played *Halo 2* on stage and laughed about the good times.

Self-effacing and visibly anxious, Harmonix boss Alex Rigopulos was ▶

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Microsoft's Phil Spencer takes to the Galen Center floor for the pre-E3 Xbox briefing, his choice of T-shirt a knowing wink to his detractors online

Microsoft's briefing was distinguished by the electronic wristbands handed to attendees upon registration: the devices lit up in accordance with stage-managed direction, delivering the kind of vibe normally associated with a Coldplay gig, albeit with more *Forza*

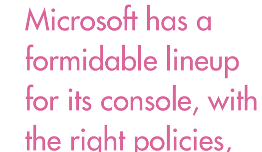
given the unenviable task of representing the meagre Kinect portion of the show with *Dance Central Spotlight* and *Fantasia*, but both demoed well on the show floor in the following days. *Forza Horizon 2* (below left) is stellar; *Scalebound*, stale CG trailer aside, is a Platinum Games exclusive; *Fable Legends* seems to be enjoying its tower defence shake-up; *Ori And The Blind Forest* is a gorgeously animated gift from the PC indie scene; much the same is being said of the Fleischer-inspired *Cuphead*.

It was a punishing onslaught of games without shape or order, but if a lack of structure is the worst that can be levelled at Microsoft's showing then consider it a victory after 12 months of defeat. Microsoft has a formidable lineup for its revitalised console, which at last has the right policies, the right price and the right package. While it wasn't offensive, it wasn't what you'd call 'an offensive' either.

A new *Crackdown* (below right) was an odd choice of closer, especially in a year where the cloud was the last subject on Microsoft's lips. The CG trailer teased proper use of server-computed destruction to finally sell us on the cloud's power, but only if you read between the lines.

PlayStation 4 had

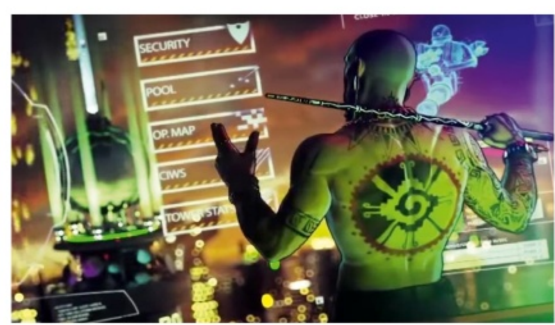
little to counter and little to even prove after its confident year. So, free to experiment and even take a chance or two, Sony's conference did just that at the expense of major announcements or exclusives.



The absence of Jack Tretton, the friendly and penitent uncle who helped charm PlayStation through dark times, was telling. Last year's handover to relative rottweiler Andrew House set the stage for Tretton's replacement as SCEA boss, Shawn Layden, whose general appearance and eerily assured patter had you wondering if he'd pull a rabbit from a hat or a gun on the audience. It was a bizarrely immaculate performance at a show known best for charming amateurism from its executive hosts, the magic of which was to distract from the show's flabby midsection which failed, annoyingly, to address non-US territories when announcing various betas and services.

Layden's command served its own purpose, though. If the levity and almost unbearable friendliness of Adam Boyes' love letter segment assured us this was still 'new Sony', it was Layden's confidence that evoked the older, dominant force which gave us PlayStation 2, a console that ▶







Q&A
Phil Harrison
Corporate vice president, Microsoft

What story did you want to tell at E3?
It's about demonstrating that Xbox One is the only place where you'll be able to play that number of games to that quality, those exclusives, those blockbusters, that breadth of support from the ID@Xbox programme, at the right price, supported by a great online service and continuous improvements. Over the last few months you've seen real added value being brought in to the Xbox system. I think all of that combines to tell a compelling story. We've definitely learned a lot over the last year and we have continued to hold ourselves to a very high standard.

The Xbox brand has been reinvented since Phil Spencer took charge back in March. Did that bring with it a degree of cultural change?
I don't know if it's a cultural change. I think it's a reflection of the world that we live in, that your fans are just a tweet away from direct connection to the team members inside the company. We take that feedback and that responsibility really seriously; we want to make Xbox One the place where you can play the best games at the right price with the best service. Yes, there were some things that we had to course-correct along the way, but I think that the future direction of travel is great.

I think it was important for us to show an incredible lineup of games you'll play this year, and really reinforce the fact that we showed games that will be in your collection in 2014, whether it was *Halo: The Master Chief Collection*, whether it was *Sunset Overdrive*, whether it was *Forza Horizon 2*… all of which will be exclusive to Xbox One this year. It was also important to show a bunch of things that will be coming in 2015 and beyond, which we hope will [remind] people who have already bought an Xbox One why they've bought an Xbox One, and attract new people as well.

What about people who bought Xbox One for Kinect?
We are committed to adding and innovating with Kinect, so everybody who enjoys Kinect on Xbox One will get additional features. We'll continue to add functionality, to refine the experience on voice, the technology around gesture and ID, and we'll continue to add additional applications that take advantage of Kinect so it remains a key part of our strategy.

Kinect games were conspicuous by their absence from the show, though. By the middle of April you'd sold five million Xboxes, all bundled with Kinect – which means there are five million people and only two firstparty games. Does that not show a lack of support for Kinect as a gaming device?
I don't believe so. The breadth of games that we showed here for Kinect is more than we showed last year; we have more games coming both from established, large, traditional publishers as well as ID@Xbox games. We showed a number of innovations there – *Fru* is one of my favourites. The value of Kinect to Xbox One is partly about games, but also about the way you interact with the device using voice, gesture or biometric login. We will continue to innovate on that; we'll continue to add capabilities to the whole Xbox One experience.

Given that it allows them to free up a further ten per cent of the GPU power, developers must like the idea of a Kinect-less Xbox.
The new libraries that we gave to all developers in June give you the additional ten per cent performance, irrespective of which machine you have. You don't have to unplug Kinect to get it; every game can take what we call 'the GPU reservation' and use it for themselves. Now, when the game finishes and the box hands power back to the console, then all of the connectivity you get with Kinect continues to work as before. You don't need to unplug Kinect to get it, and it works on every machine.

> "Our strategy is to lead in a cloud world. Xbox Live is the highest-performing example of that"

It's no secret developers have been struggling to match PlayStation 4's resolution in multiplatform games. If the console is as capable, was Microsoft's XDK simply not ready for distribution?
This is a fairly standard evolution of any platform. Over a period of time the platform engineering focus is to give as much power as possible to the developer so that the developer can turn that in to an experience that gives as much as fun as possible to the player.

You'd agree that Sony was able to give more power to developers at an earlier point, though, right?
That may be true, but there is no doubt that we are very committed to giving all of the power that we can to developers, and we're already seeing some very substantial improvements in frame rate, resolution that developers are already talking about it, just in the few days they've had access to these libraries.

DX12 is an incredibly optimised API which has graphics engineers excited. In theory, is it something Xbox One could use?
That's correct, and it's a long-term commitment. One of the things that we have inside of Microsoft which is not so obvious to the outside world is some of the best graphics research engineers on the planet. That's their mission: turn code into efficient pixels.

Let's talk about where you are in the marketplace. Sony is reporting nine million units sold; is Xbox at around six million by this point?
We have announced north of five, and the numbers that we're happy to talk about is over five million units sold. The key stats are that this is the fastest-growing console we have launched, more games are being purchased on Xbox One than any other console, and we have five hours of average usage per day, with over a billion voice commands issued.

Most of those commands are 'Xbox on' and 'Xbox off, yes', though.
The engagement and usage of all aspects of Xbox One have exceeded our expectations. And the lineup of games that we have announced or shown at our media briefing – and that players will get a chance to play this year – shows that our commitment is unwavering.

There is a gap, but by the end of the previous generation PS3 and 360 drew more or less even. What does it take for Xbox to close the gap faster than Sony did previously?
Some analysts will suggest that we are less than five per cent into this generation, so there is plenty of market opportunity ahead of us. Hats off to Sony, they've had a great start; they have been in more countries and – to date, at least – at a lower price. We have announced a new Xbox One at a lower price; we go to 29 new countries starting in September. It's about games, it's about Xbox Live as a service, and it's about value. We think that those three things give us every opportunity, and not just to compete. That's not what we're here to do. We're here to grow the market and build a long-term business for Xbox One in as many homes as we can, delivering the best games and entertainment experiences that we can.

Sony is very good at demonstrating its power as a technological innovator, and Microsoft has been equally innovative technologically, but how will you prove that when the focus is so heavily on games?
Our strategy as a company is to lead in a cloud world. And Xbox Live is the highest-performing example of Microsoft's cloud strategy, whether it's the sheer volume and breadth of the service, with 48 million members, or whether it is the very deep technical innovations that have supported games like *Titanfall* and *Forza Motorsport*. We'll continue to scale, and expand to many of the games we saw today, whether it's *Crackdown*, *Fable Legends*, *Horizon 2*, etc. We think that is a clear place for us as a company to put our technical innovation because that has real impact in gameplay. It has real tangible benefits to gameplay now. It's not something that will land two or three years from now.

The games you showed today were much broader than anything Microsoft has shown before. Who is the Xbox consumer now?
I think we've seen in the last five years an explosion of people who play games, and self-identify as a gamer. Whether it's somebody playing *Clash Of Clans* or *Candy Crush* on their phone or iPad, or gaming on the console on the biggest screen in the house, pretty much everybody is a gamer and there's this positive wave moving through the world. As people get older they continue to play games. You may choose to change the pattern of gameplay as you get a family, as you get kids, or whatever, but I think that the lineup of what we shared today is a reflection of the impact that games have in society and will continue to have in the future.

It's not just about driving, shooting and sports; it's a much deeper and sophisticated set of consumers who are more discerning in their tastes. The reaction to games like *Inside* and *Ori And The Blind Forest* is phenomenal. I think that confluence of art and gameplay is a great place for us to be leading, supported by all the wonderful work that is being done at the ID@Xbox programme as well. I think the platform can definitely support all game styles and all game designs.



Q&A
Fergal Gara
Managing director, Sony Computer Entertainment UK

You're here at E3 to meet retailers as well as the media. How has their perception of you changed now that you're in the lead?
They see a resurgent category, they see a resurgent PlayStation brand, and they know there's great sales in it for them. They know we want to sell more consoles this year than we sold last year; it won't be about one big bang, one huge launch moment, but hopefully great sales over many weeks. The UK market in particular: we were third in the home console market only three or four years ago, and now we're leading the market. We're very proud of that, and in no way complacent, but of course that brings with it more engagement. We've worked hard to be open and to create that engagement, and it's very much reciprocated from our retail partners. And our publishing partners: all the partners we work with, really, have an extra level of determination and interest in working with us, which is great.

Last year you won E3 at a canter. This year it's much closer, but do you feel like it's your show again?
I won't comment on the opposition. I understand it was a good showing. I think what we are proud of is that we did the right thing for year two: we showed there is a fantastic array of games coming, and coming into Christmas that's hugely important to bring in the next wave of consumers. But what I also think we did very well was to show that the PlayStation ecosystem continues to push forward. I think the momentum we've got as a brand and a business was very visible on the night. We've not just got what you'd expect this year, which is great games; the story continues. PlayStation TV, PlayStation Now and Project Morpheus are the key examples of that. There's much more to come.

Morpheus is a tough thing to market: you can't demo it on stage. How will you approach that?
Thousands of headsets! One in each seat. We're a fair way away from taking it to market, and we're fairly open about that. As you know, it was revealed at GDC. That's not an accident, it was a very deliberate strategy to say: "We've got this hardware, it's maybe near final, it's pretty sophisticated and in good shape. We've got a few bits of demo content here that show some of what's possible, but we haven't got a set of experiences that are go-to-market ready. But help us. Here's the blank canvas, here are some ideas you might want to consider. Go forth and develop". And when those experiences have been developed, and we can see them taking shape, we'll know when the right day to go public is.

You must have a rough idea of when that will be.
There are thoughts, but I think it will be shaped by the experiences. It's a bit like delaying a game until it's at the right standard. There's a right time to bring these things out and [in this case] it's when there's enough great content.

On that note, 2015 is going to be an amazing year for videogames, but is your 2014 slate good enough?
I think it is. But I also think 2015's going to get off to a great start – whether that be *Arkham Knight* or *The Order: 1886* or other titles in the pipeline, we can have confidence that 2015 is going to be great as well. But to have the likes of *Destiny* coming, which launches the peak season, I think that is absolutely tremendous. And a couple of massive titles from last year coming across in *GTAV* and *The Last Of Us*, plus much more besides. We're pretty pleased.

> "We were third in the UK home console market only three or four years ago; now we're leading it"

You have such a large network of firstparty studios, but it seems you're incredibly reliant on thirdparty publishers, for the remainder of the year especially.
We've got a great set of partnerships there in 2014 and even in 2015: *Arkham Knight* is one of the best-looking next-gen titles I've seen so far. It's way up there, I'm very excited about it – it's a great title for us to be working with. I think we're much better represented in the firstperson shooter area: *Destiny*, *Battlefield: Hardline* looked great as well, and both of those are pre-Christmas. So the breadth and depth, I think, our representation across genres – right from *Destiny* to *Disney Infinity* – that covers a hell of a spectrum.

There was a focus on platform-exclusive content during your press conference. How important is that to the success of a console?
Well, you saw Andy [House] put up the words: play it best and play it first. Our vision is to create the best place to play; if it's the best place to play, it's got to have some unique experiences. That can be generated in two ways: either by our own firstparty studios, or some points of difference [from] some of the key publishers and developers we're working with. We're doing both of those things. I'd pick out *Destiny* as a great example of where those points of difference will be truly meaningful, and will mean PlayStation 4 is the best place to play *Destiny* by some way.

That speaks to the extent to which things have turned around – 360 used to be the place to play shooters.
Absolutely. We've learnt a lot from the last generation: we had a list of things to fix – or to improve upon, I should say – and that's one of them. We're in far stronger shape now.

Why wasn't *Driveclub*, one of the few firstparty titles due for PS4 this year, even mentioned on stage?
Just time and priority. I'd actually pick out three pretty significant things that were missing on Monday evening that certainly matter to me and my team and our plan for this year: *Driveclub*, *Minecraft* for PS4, and *SingStar* for PS4 and PS3. There's only so much time, and *Driveclub* has been shown before. I think it could well have deserved another airing, especially as it's now looking so, so much better. I'm sure Andy made the executive producer decision as to what made the final cut. It's one of those things we didn't cover again but I have no concerns about the plan: it's another example of a slip but, again, it's better for it and it's definitely better to bring the game out right than bring it out early.

The annual E3 question: where's *The Last Guardian*?
[Laughs] I have no idea. We didn't see it, so there's no news! Sorry, I have nothing to report.

What we knew as Vita TV is now PlayStation TV, which seems a pretty logical name change. How big a focus is that for the rest of the year, and what's your target market?
In short, it is significant; we have a significant number in our plan for it. The name change works for me because although a lot of the architecture is technically a PlayStation Vita, we think the primary role we should communicate for this device is as a PS4 extender. And at the price point – which in the UK will be £85 – we think that's reasonably affordable and the best, the simplest place to start in terms of communicating its benefits is to say that it gives you that practical home solution whereby you can continue to use the TV and decamp from the living room and continue to play in another room.

There's more to it, whether that be as a client device for PlayStation Now or the ability to play Vita games; maybe it's got a fantastic role as a 'My First PlayStation' to take away on a family holiday or an entry point to the PlayStation brand. There are multiple angles as to how we could take it to market but we're pretty clear that the best, and easiest way to articulate the benefit is as the PS4 extender. That's where we're going to focus.

How's Vita doing in the UK now? You're experimenting with bundles, and the perception of the device has changed now that PS4 is on shelves.
It's doing really well. It's in growth; year to date, we're up. We're absolutely pleased with that, and see plenty more opportunity on the horizon. The PS4 agenda, as you rightly point out, is key, and it is having a positive effect. Bringing a full *Minecraft* to Vita is another milestone in the year to come. Vita's not going to sell as well as PS4 this year, but it'll sell very comparably to PS3 in the UK this year. It's a good, solid performer, a key part of the family.

How about software? PlayStation Plus is so generous – has it had an adverse effect on game sales?
It's fair to say PlayStation Plus is a very popular addition for Vita owners. They kind of feed off each other – it works both ways. People are consuming a significant proportion of digital games – they may be [bought] individually, they may be through their Plus subscription, but they're still buying a good proportion of packaged games as well. It's a real mix, but we're seeing games being played and we're seeing games being bought on top of the subscription.

Microsoft has played its hand on price; do you feel any pressure to cut the PS4 price in response?
We still haven't caught up with launch-day demand across Europe. We are very satisfied with the pricepoint we landed at; I see no reason to change that any time soon. It's great value, gamers have clearly been happy with it, and it's still selling. We still have availability problems – which we'll hopefully catch very soon – but we haven't even caught up with day-one demand in some countries so there's clearly no need for a price cut.

looked like the Monolith from 2001: A Space Odyssey, indicative of its game-changing powers. At E3 2014 Sony was a company settling back into its role as the evil empire, minus the evil. There was no sign of the dreaded cockiness or complacency that sabotaged PS3 – that cycle isn't repeating just yet – but there was an artistic bravado at play. Could Sony even put a foot wrong if it tried at this point?

The answer came quickly enough: yes, it can. The demo of Ready At Dawn's mysterious *The Order: 1886* was awful. Disastrous. A long and boring cutscene punctuated by token button taps, with rare combat that aped *Gears Of War* with none of the spectacle, aggression or knowing silliness of Epic's game. It suggested a developer more comfortable with technology than mechanical innovation, and more fascinated by cinema than by gameplay. An uphill climb awaits the game, for sure.

It was also, thankfully, a blip in a conference where other gambles paid off, the next being an *actual live demo* of *LittleBigPlanet 3*. People had fiddled with controllers in front of impossibly flawless 'gameplay' on Microsoft's stage, but this wasn't that. 'It's all going wrong!' you panicked as Sackboy and his three new friends bungled their manoeuvres. There wasn't the same daredevil precedent that gave us *LBP* in the first place, but the game itself worked and the demo felt as perfectly British as the game: a little makeshift, a little ham-fisted, but thoroughly charming. If there was any serious point being made, it was that no game at Microsoft's event could get away with such tomfoolery.

The awful demo of *Order: 1886* was, thankfully, a blip in a conference where other gambles paid off

Like Microsoft's show, there were a great many games, and like Microsoft's show it was the composition and complexion of the performance that sticks in the mind. For one thing, it was stomach-churning. Ultraviolent trailers for Suda 51's *Let It Die*, *Hotline Miami 2: Wrong Number* and *Mortal Kombat X* made the now customary neck-knifing in *Far Cry 4* look tame. Not, in all likelihood, a deliberate move, but not something Sony cared to censor, either. With *No Man's Sky* bringing the high concept and a remastered *Grim Fandango* the class – neither alone in those respects – this was an inclusive, all-terrain landscape of games and the best possible omen for a console, but no more or less than the one Microsoft prepared for Xbox One.



Less explicit but possibly more significant was the aura surrounding multiplatform reveals. PlayStation 4 is empirically the best platform for pure game performance, the only caveats being games that strike a better balance of resolution and framerate on Xbox One. We know from the previous generation what a weapon that can be, but never at E3 has a single platform owned the multiplatform space as Sony did here. When it showed *Batman: Arkham Knight*, even letting it hijack the auditorium's lighting for a bit, it felt like an exclusive. ▶

Sony's Andrew House had plenty to get through, not least introducing an *LBP3* demo so charming you might never have even noticed that Media Molecule wasn't mentioned. Sumo Digital – which worked on *LBP*'s Vita incarnation – is the studio responsible



When Microsoft announced *Rise Of The Tomb Raider* at its own show, it felt like a commercial for a Sony game. PS4's hardware gamble has won it the right to say 'better on PlayStation', and left little doubt here as to who's in the driving seat.

All of that said, the show could have done without Brian Michael Bendis, co-creator of superhero comic Powers, looking increasingly ill at ease as he and a Sony-produced series overstayed their welcome. What should have been a neat adjunct to talk of PlayStation TV suspiciously inflated way past the point where there was anything left to say, and for the one person wanting to know more about Powers the series, 99 would have expected a whole lot more about virtual-reality system Project Morpheus.

If you just stop counting the numbers for a second, you can always trust Nintendo to be fun

We say 'system', because the strength of Morpheus is how it integrates into existing Sony hardware and, much as Now benefits Vita, consolidates the PlayStation family. Demos were sensibly left to the show floor, and early signs are that the pieces – camera, Move controllers and visor – make a more convincing whole than their disparate origins suggest. With *EVE: Valkyrie* still the poster child of modern VR across both Morpheus and Oculus Rift, there's something to be said for the parity of the two platforms and the sense of common goals. No one did say it, though, and so Morpheus was left looking less of a finished product than its actual prototype suggests.

Around the show floor and off the record, developers expressed doubts as to whether PS4 even has the power to run games with the level of detail virtual reality demands. A PC can simply throw more power at the problem to output a game's display twice and create a 3D world for Oculus, but when the same game is already stretching PS4's GPU, it won't be ported to Morpheus without serious graphical compromises. It's an insurmountable problem that might explain Sony's reluctance to push Project Morpheus as anything more than an exciting experiment until both first and thirdparty developers have proven they can make PlayStation VR without compromises.



Quite where Nintendo was supposed to fit into E3 after last year's forgettable showing was anyone's guess. As a footnote, most probably. But the Digital Media Event Nintendo hosted in lieu of a conference presented surely the most uplifting message of E3: that it's the little things that matter, and that if you stop counting the numbers for a second, you can always trust Nintendo to be fun.

With no stage component at all, this was the conference too intimate for E3. It wasn't just a broadcast, it was a boycott. Far from the bombast in Los Angeles, it visited quiet corners of Nintendo's Japan where, refreshingly for E3, developers were seen actually speaking their minds. Reading more from design docs than autocues, they introduced the likes of *Zelda* and *Kirby* with questions rather than proclamations. How do you make a meaningful open-world *Zelda*? What's the *correct* follow-up to *Kirby's Epic Yarn*? (It's the plainly delightful *Yoshi's Woolly World*.) Why does *Dynasty Warriors* matter enough for *Hyrule Warriors*, a mashup with the *Zelda* universe, to exist?

These were deep thoughts to be having just seconds after Satoru Iwata and Reggie Fils-Aime had fought a live-action *Smash Bros* round, and in between GIF-friendly, laser-targeted skits from *Robot Chicken*. Nintendo's E3 was Anchorman, then it was The Naked Gun, and then it was just Fils-Aime slowly filling the screen and saying something of importance. He spoke for Nintendo and *as* Nintendo to fans of Nintendo old and new, wandering and returning. In no way did it suffer from cutting out the middlemen: the knackered reporters and whooping rent-a-mobs of a live E3 audience. Indeed, this was an eccentric mix of games and hardware that deserved its

Sony brought new hardware to the E3 stage, but perhaps not the goods everyone expected. Project Morpheus stayed on E3's show floor, while a new white PS4 model and PlayStation TV – AKA Vita TV in Japan – became the focus of Sony's media event







This was Shigeru Miyamoto's most prominent E3 in a long while, showing off a Wii U *Star Fox* prototype alongside *Project Giant Robot* and *Project Guard*



freedom from the E3 clap-o-meter. E3 audiences seldom register interest in the likes of *Skylanders*, *Disney Infinity* or Nintendo's belated answer to them, the Amiibo range of toys. Given a direct line to Wii U hardware – you simply place the figurine on the Gamepad, so that it connects with its NFC technology – Amiibos sound better than they look. The flamethrowing Mario looks a little chintzy, more Skylanders than Disney, but perhaps future models will fare better. Regardless, the concept of data passing between figures and pad evokes fond memories of the *F-Zero* License Card and the Japanese arcade scene, making them seem instantly less inert than *Infinity*'s precious statues, despite the underlying similarities.

Between them, *Xenoblade Chronicles* and *Bayonetta 2* (bundled with the Wii U debut of the first game) were the most classically Japanese games of a day unusually light on *Final Fantasy*. Gone are the times when Square's grandiose CG trailers made them the prize of the E3 conferences, and for once the franchise seems to be saving its energy. Honourable mention to Tomonobu Itagaki's *Devil's Third*, pulled from the wreckage of THQ, for being the most gleefully anachronistic action game to ever be declared 'a new breed of action game', and a surprise to see it signed up by Nintendo, of all firstparties.





Nintendo's sense of fun made mascots of the unlikeliest characters – Iwata and Fils-Aime – who have dominated the social media game without ever typing a single word on Twitter, thanks to immediately viral content like a *Smash Bros* punch-up between them on both sides of the Pacific

Good games and exciting promises, but who was it aimed at, exactly, this lineup? Perhaps the message was that, by stubbornly attempting to appeal to everyone, Nintendo isn't appealing at all. While Microsoft felt it should come to its audience cap in hand, even with some five million Xbox Ones sold in eight months, Nintendo was after nobody's charity. If you hadn't read the headlines or visited the eShop too often, you'd think everything was rosy for Wii U and 3DS. The games look great, the development staff sound happy, and who needs those uninterested thirdparties anyway?

Both Sony and Nintendo referred to their roots this year, the former's PlayStation Now about to turn history into a formidable weapon, the latter using its cast-iron values as a shield. Microsoft, a company whose missteps and often cynical wanderlust have given it so little to fall back on, seemed left out of this renaissance. Glances to the past – *Halo*'s remake, *Phantom Dust* – would have been time wasted at a show about reframing and rebranding Xbox One as a machine focused squarely on videogames. Microsoft's homegrown titles nearly proved it; now, all that needs to be addressed is the trifling matter of those thirdparty studios wringing the same performance from Microsoft's platform as they do from Sony's.

But why dwell on the negatives? One year after its debut was trashed by PS4's pricetag and policies, Xbox One has the exclusive games to stand up to Sony's powerhouse console. For the first time in years this was an E3 without clear winners or losers, and hairline analysis risks marginalising the weird and wonderful that infiltrated every conference. We were shown niches within niches, and so much within that you forgot to ask where the likes of *Below*, *The Witness*, *Quantum Break* and *Driveclub* had got to. It says a lot that they weren't missed too much. ■

Only if you Dare

Abertay's ProtoPlay gears up to showcase the brightest new videogame talent

Dare To Be Digital, Abertay University's annual student coding competition, kicked off in June and will see 15 teams of five students attempt to create a game prototype in just nine weeks. The results of their work will be showcased at ProtoPlay, under a large marquee in Dundee's City Square, which is taking place August 7–10. ProtoPlay also allows more established indie developers to show their games for free (interested parties can apply at www.daretobedigital.com), and this year they'll be in nearby Caird Hall.

On the last day of the competition, three winners will be announced, voted for by an independent panel of industry judges. The winning teams will be nominated for the BAFTA Ones To Watch award and receive a £2,500 prize.

Sophie George, who opened this year's Dare proceedings, was a winner of 2011's competition with puzzle game *Tick Tock Toys* and went on to become the Victoria And Albert Museum's first game designer in residence. She is currently working at Abertay on a game called *Strawberry Thief*. "When I competed Dare To Be Digital, I had only recently graduated from my undergraduate degree," she tells us."So winning the competition gave a boost to the first steps in my career. I feel that being able to showcase an award-winning game at the age of 21 was key to developing the next stages of my journey into game development."

For the Dare To Be Digital finalists, the experience can be invaluable. "Winning ProtoPlay meant a lot for us," says DOS Studios' **Mattis Delerud**, who was one of last year's winners with twitch action game *Size DOES Matter*. "It enabled us to be visible to more people and for us to gain a lot of confidence in ourselves as developers. When we saw that a large number of people enjoyed the game, we were amazed! We thought for a while that *Size DOES Matter* was a niche game. ProtoPlay proved us wrong."

"It enabled us to be visible to more people and to gain a lot of confidence in ourselves as game developers"

According to Delerud, *Size DOES Matter*, which sees you adjusting the size of a block and manoeuvring it through gaps in an unholy union of *Flappy Bird* and *Super Hexagon*, is driven by its music. And winning ProtoPlay lent DOS Studios the credibility it needed to work with the artists it admired, including Chipzel, Eirik Suhrke and Savant. "In other words," Delerud says, "without Dare To Be Digital and ProtoPlay, DOS Studios would not be where we are today."

It's an event that transcends the typical audience for a videogame show, and this year's ProtoPlay – which we'll be covering in two issues' time – will surely build on its success to date. "I think these events expose the videogame medium to a wider range of people than it usually does," Delerud says. "This is my favourite part. We had 50-year-olds come up and play *Size DOES Matter*, as well as shy children. In my opinion, society benefits from this; it's our responsibility to show society that videogames can be everything, and that it's a medium that will be here for a long time." ■



"My experience at Dare and ProtoPlay really helped me be vocal and open about showing my work to other people and listening to feedback and ideas," says George, pictured here with SCEE academic development manager Luke Savage

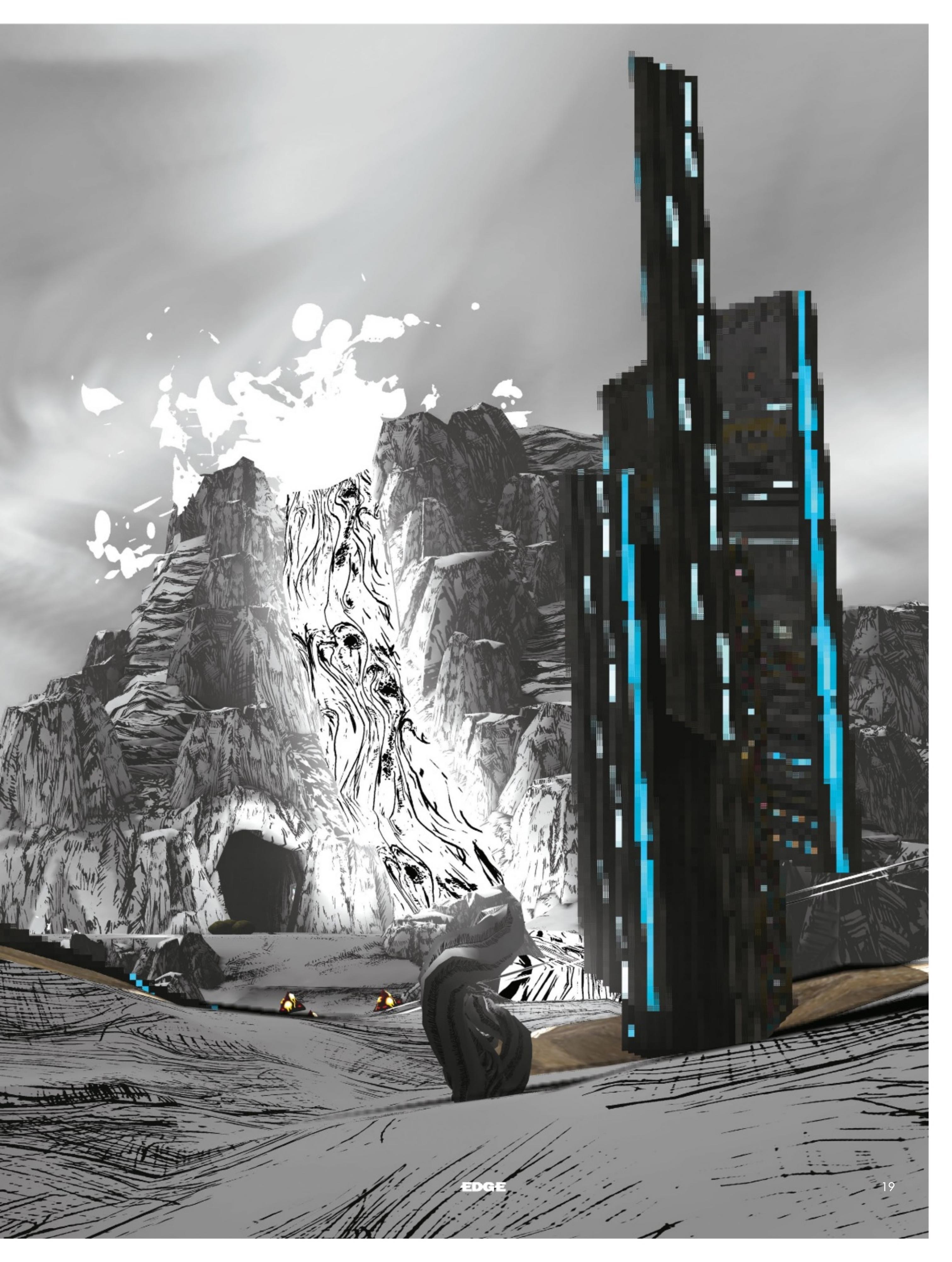
VIRTUAL REALITIES

The unfinished world of *The Magic Circle*

The Magic Circle is a game set inside a game named 'The Magic Circle'. For 20 years, the fictional Magic Circle game inside the game – itself a remake of a fictional '80s text adventure named 'The Magic Circle' – has been trapped in development hell, until the game's characters become self-aware.

In the first game from Jordan Thomas's Question Games, formed with Irrational's Stephen Alexander and Arkane's Kane Shin, a black-and-white fantasy world is in a state of utter collapse. The world's denizens regard their creators as ham-fisted gods, and artefacts from other games on the studio's server are bleeding into the world. Into the system comes the player, draining power from colourful fissures and using it to reprogram the game.

The Magic Circle is also the power you use to reshape the world, drawing onto the screen like ink on a whiteboard and encircling any object you want to examine. Enemies' AI parameters and abilities can be modified and the world becomes a puzzle that is solved by exploiting the code to make creatures friendly, fireproof, airborne and more. *The Magic Circle* is a massively meta joke, but it's also a puzzle sandbox players will solve by further breaking an already broken world. We'll take a closer look soon. ■



Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"It seems really outdated, almost, to get that question. 'How many levels?' Or, 'How do quests work?' Well, we won't have any quests."

Explaining *No Man's Sky* is a new challenge for **Sean Murray**



"We have one game that we wait for the machine to be more massmarket to launch. **It's on the shelf, waiting for more families to have the console."**

Ubisoft CEO **Yves Guillemot** teases players with that rarest of things – a new thirdparty game for Wii U



"People are going through this rollercoaster of emotions, and it's our fault for not releasing the game yet. We really don't want to release piecemeal information **until we can say this is *The Last Guardian*."**

SCE Worldwide Studios man **Shuhei Yoshida** feels your pain

"I love Kinect. The $100 doesn't matter for me. For a lot of people it does, so we've got to give you an option. **Do you want to dance? No? Then you don't need the device."**



Microsoft's **Ken Lobb** won't dance around important Xbox One issues

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game Left 4 Dead Survivors
Manufacturer Valve/Taito

In 2006 Taito brought *Half-Life 2* to Japanese arcades as *Half-Life 2: Survivor*. Housed in a cumbersome cabinet with foot pedals and two sticks, it found its way west only at Valve's Seattle HQ, and was generally poorly received even in Japan. Undeterred, Taito is revisiting the experiment with *Left 4 Dead: Survivors*.

Survivors is Taito's third notable attempt at bringing a firstperson shooter to Japanese arcades but is the first one to eschew the pedals and sticks in favour of a mouse and Wii-style nunchuck – hardware that might not last very long in the wilds of a western arcade.

Like *Half-Life 2*, *Left 4 Dead: Survivors* uses existing Valve assets for its levels, but localises the characters as Japanese students on a school trip. College bro Kudo Yusuke fights alongside tour guide Kirishima Sara, token blue-jeans American Blake Jordan and inevitable Japanese schoolgirl Haruka Hirose. Games are time-limited using Survivor Points (SVP), which are scattered around as collectibles, and when your SVP runs out the game is ended with a relentless and overwhelming zombie rush.

The game's late-May location test was popular but received a cool response from players, who criticised the game's controls, voice acting and difficulty. They're easily fixed woes, but likely symptoms of a deeper problem: like *Half-Life 2*, *Left 4 Dead* was never meant for arcades.



My Favourite Game
Johnny Vegas

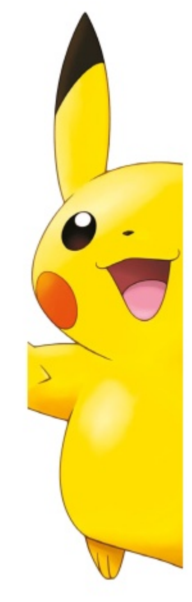
The comedian, actor and former aspiring priest on his attempts at coding, sneaking time at the arcade, and hoarding Pokémon

Comedian **Michael Pennington** exists in the shadow of his alter ego. He is better known as stout-swilling surrealist Johnny Vegas, an eccentric who it's hard to imagine doing anything as normal as playing. But games are a longtime obsession for Pennington, a passion recently rekindled by his young son.

You grew up in a strict religious environment in the '70s and early '80s, even joining a seminary. Did you miss out on that golden era of games?
When I was younger, it was all about arcades for me – things like *Galaxian*, *Pac-Man* and *Phoenix*. I remember a school field trip to York, and we stayed in some student halls. They had an arcade cab in the reception there, so that was all I did for the trip. Even back then, games would just really draw me in like that. At about the same time, friends were getting Ataris, so it was all about getting round to their houses to play that. I had an *Astro Wars* handheld, and I eventually got a Spectrum and one of those printers that pumped out those little till receipts. That really felt so advanced. I thought life couldn't get any better. Then I went to a seminary to follow priesthood. Anything like *Astro Wars* was outlawed there.

You hosted the Pokémon X & Y Battle Tournament UK finals. Do you have a real affection for the series?
Oh, yes, I've liked *Pokémon* for a really long time. Recently, it's through my son, but I was a big collector the first time around. I collected all sorts back then, and when my son got into it, I had this whole bundle of Pokémon stuff boxed up.

COMEDY CENTRAL
Michael Pennington's path to becoming a comic involved a lot of detours, many of which have fed into his embittered stage persona. Aged 11, he was set on joining the priesthood, but moved back home from seminary after four terms. He later studied pottery at Middlesex University, earning a third. After time tending bar and a few false starts at comedy, he finally found success in the guise of Johnny Vegas. By the early 2000s, Vegas was a regular on British screens, and Pennington continues act and write under the name today.



I thought back at the time it was going to be my collector's retirement thing, but I brought it down for him, and the shock on his face was amazing. He couldn't comprehend that I'd been younger once, or that I'd know anything about something as cool to him as Pokémon. Then, when the offer to host the tournament came through, he told me: "You're taking this gig, Dad".

So as well as stepping in as your agent there, your son has rekindled your enthusiasm for games?
He has, but I gamed for years. It had got to the point of being a bigger priority for me than working… I was playing all day when I should have been writing. My agent would ring and ask how a script was coming along, and I'd been playing *TOCA* all day, driving backwards to wind up the Suzuki team. I was a massive *Resident Evil* player, doing it into the small hours. This was all during that time in your life that's perfect for gaming: I lived alone and had no day job to speak of.

> "I spent three days making my own version of Donkey Kong, and it was woeful. Honest to God, it was dire"

Do you think games can be a platform for comedy? We've seen the likes of Stephen Merchant getting involved with game projects. Are you tempted?
I'd love to. Years ago, I was approached about a game in development. There was talk of me lending my own voice and doing some motion-capture work. It was for a scene in a comedy club. It was one of those things I'd accept in a heartbeat. To be featured in a videogame – that's on my ultimate bucket list. But it never happened – they probably saw me in 18 Stone Of Idiot and thought, 'We can't trust him in a [motion-capture] studio'.

It's something my son wants to do. He's quite serious about wanting to be a game designer. In fact, they're teaching programming games as a voluntary lesson at a secondary school I was looking at for him. It's great they do that, and if you're creative then learning that technical stuff is amazing. There is a career there, too. It's that classic thing of finding a job you love meaning you never have to work a day in your life. I'd support him doing that. If something inspires your kid, support them.

Have you ever tried making a game?
I did, yes. I spent three days making my own version of *Donkey Kong*, and it was woeful. It was like a letter X jumping over zeroes, and there were about two platforms. After all the effort, that was it. Honest to God, it was dire.

What's your favourite game, and why?
Well, looking back to the arcades, it used to be *Phoenix*, without a shadow of a doubt. But really, with everything that's happened with me and my son, it might have to be *Pokémon*. There's that lovely turnaround where the student becomes the master. That's been great. Oh, but there's also *Rogue Squadron* on the GameCube. I'm a huge Star Wars fan, and it just felt like Star Wars. ■



Pennington has recently finished writing an autobiography, Becoming Johnny Vegas, which will be published in September

WEBSITE

Arcade Font Writer
www.bit.ly/1hJpxtz
Richard Davey's HTML5 port of NFG Games' Arcade Font Engine is a warm cup of nostalgia powered by a sophisticated UI. It's the simplest of ideas – a text editor that outputs your writing in one of 140 classic game fonts as a PNG – but it casts light on one of gaming's invisible arts. Few think twice about typeface design, but here you'll see a selection of font artistry from the beautiful (SNK's *Samurai Shodown 3*) to the near illegible (*RayForce*). You'll see countless Capcom fonts, minute evolutions between four generations of the same *Gradius* style, and two entirely different character sets created for *Klax*. They amount to man-years of work, and most were never used to write anything other than 'ASS' on the high score table, so treat yourself and give them the workout they deserve.



VIDEO

Super Smash Bros Source
www.bit.ly/1irYjC4
Almost too accurate in its execution, Crazyhalo's *Super Smash Bros Source* trailer replaces the regular *Smash Bros* cast with the stars of *Half-Life*, *Team Fortress 2*, *Left 4 Dead*, *Portal* and *Dota 2* in a shot-for-shot remake of the Nintendo GameCube trailer. It's a spectacular piece of design and editing for a game that will never exist. By the time the *Source* trailer is left with only the nameless *Counter-Strike* crew to replace the *Star Fox* team, you'll remember why Nintendo is the master of the *Smash Bros* template: because only Nintendo has quite so many heroes that are worth being.

WEB GAME

The Sun And Moon
www.bit.ly/1njr9GF
Daniel Lissen's Ludum Dare 29 winner is subversive in a way that screenshots just can't show. Visually, it's comfortably familiar, combining a mint-green *Luftrausers* cloudscape with a design shorthand that's evocative of Metanet's *N*. Yet this is a platform game where making contact with the platform's edge is only the beginning: hold down Ctrl and you'll dip beneath any solid surface as if it were water, buoyed up like a balloon and plunged down into the level's depths by your momentum. The result is a joyously fluid test of spatial planning and fine control as you guide the ebullient little blob hero to three tiny pixel moons and then the exit. Ludum Dare 29's theme was 'Beneath the surface', and that fits *The Sun And Moon* both literally and in its collection of clever puzzles that transcend its presentation.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

When we weren't doing everything else, we were thinking about stuff like this

ADAPTOR

GameCube Controller Adapter
Thanks to Wii's backwards compatibility, a vibrant *Smash Bros* community and Nintendo's propensity for putting out bombproof hardware, the GameCube pad's useful life has reached year 13, making it possibly the longest-lived peripheral in console history. Its latest life extension comes courtesy of a multitap-like contraption which connects GameCube pads to Wii U just in time for the new *Super Smash Bros*. Exactly how many GameCube controllers have survived the wear of two console generations with enough life left in them to make it through one more is open to question, but it's now possible for some brand-new *Smash Bros* players to batter their friends using a controller born before they were.



continue

Nintendo/YouTube revenue split
Nintendo makes games, YouTubers make videos, everyone makes money

Cry freedom
Dreadnought, *BattleCry* and *Hunt*: a new stable of quality F2P games

Cloud and clear
City-wide destruction in Cloudengine's *Crackdown* might finally prove the true power of the cloud

quit

Prerendered promos
Much as we admire the craftsmanship, please can all E3 2015 demos be rendered in realtime?

***Mario Kart* Mercedes**
Branded DLC becomes even more bewildering

Generation Kill
Look out, big-league development: even EA can only bring two non-sports games to E3

TWEETS

Sony and Microsoft stole each other's E3 events from last year.
Markus Persson @notch
Creator, *Minecraft*

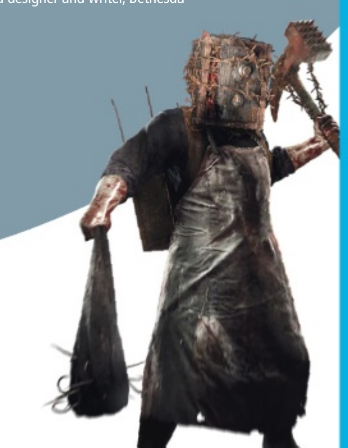
To dismiss some of the most critically acclaimed titles on Vita as unworthy because of their indie status is just self-defeating.
Shahid Kamal Ahmad @shahidkamal
PlayStation business development manager

Instructive stereotypes: game fans talk mostly about games that aren't out yet, film buffs talk about films that came out >10–20 years ago.
JP LeBreton @vectorpoem
Designer, Double Fine

Dear certain indie devs: Your games look super cool. Please make them. But stop your pretentious "AAA games suck" shtick.
Emil Pagliarulo @Dezinuh
Lead designer and writer, Bethesda



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DISPATCHES AUGUST



Issue 268

Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to edge@futurenet.com. Our letter of the month wins an Ear Force PX4 or Atlas headset from Turtle Beach Inc







Turtle Beach's **Atlas** headset (RRP £119.99) is compatible with 360, Xbox One and PC setups

Spinning the moral compass

I've stopped playing *Watch Dogs*. I was really enjoying it for a time, especially the hacking. But then the disparity between this incredible interactive world and the missions that have been designed within it started to grate.

The first time I used cameras to hack a CTOS base was amazing, and timing barriers to rise at just the right moment to halt chasing police cars makes you feel all-powerful for a while. But while CTOS bases let you improvise, switching between hacking, sneaking or shooting, too many of the story missions are outdated instant-fail stealth missions or car chases.

And I really don't understand why an attempt has been made to represent Aiden as some kind of moral crusader: he's a reprehensible, self-serving criminal. It was bad enough when *Infamous* asked me to lead an anti-authoritarian revolution, but still stop the naughty drug dealers on the side. In *Watch Dogs* I steal from people with terminal diseases, mow down innocent pedestrians just so I won't be late to my nephew's birthday, and deliver naive young gang members to their untimely deaths – and watch it happen, no less. But I'm a good guy, really, because that's easier to sell, presumably.

"There are times when it feels like Drive or Heat, but *Watch Dogs* too often falls back on clichés"

There are moments when the game feels like you're in a film like Drive or Heat, films that revel in their lead characters' confused moral compasses, but *Watch Dogs* too often falls back on clichés – both mechanically and narratively – to present any kind of interesting friction. Perhaps if the people who made it had put, as your Post Script so aptly stated, less time into minigames and digital trips, and more time into the meat of the game, *Watch Dogs* would be less of a last-gen sheep in next-gen wolf's clothing.
Stephen Boucher

No one's forcing you to steal from the terminally ill or run over passers-by, but you're right that *Watch Dogs* falls foul of the open-world game's oldest problem: failing to reconcile the protagonist in the writers' heads with the latent psychopath holding the controller. If *Assassin's Creed* is any guide, at least Ubisoft will get a bit closer with each inevitable annual sequel.

Minding the gender gap

There has been a lot of noise about gender representation post-E3, with plenty of hand-wringing, brand-building editorials echoing the moral outrage on Twitter. Now, some of it I agree with, but the majority is utter twaddle. I must be careful here not to fall foul of the knee-jerk pitchfork brigade, but I think the general ire has been misdirected.

The people (including some prominent journalists) who made a fuss about the *Red Dead Redemption* Achievement where you tie a woman to the railway lines are simply demonstrating their ignorance of the Western genre. Yes, it is inherently sexist, but it doesn't demonstrate sexism within the industry, but other, pre-existing media.

As for the absence of female co-op killers in *Assassin's Creed*, well, that's more problematic. It seems odd to me that a massive company like Ubisoft couldn't manage to put some animators onto the job, but irrespective of the truth behind its reasoning, this isn't the real problem. Ubisoft is in the unique position, with all the big games it's launching and the sheer weight of resources it has available (despite what it might say), to make at least *one* of its protagonists female. But instead we get a bunch of white male leads across all of its franchises. Even *Far Cry 4*'s lead, who is a Kyrat native, doesn't stray very far from that zone, dermatologically speaking.

Sure, games with women on the cover



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don't sell as well (apparently), but by being too afraid to risk changing that, big publishers are perpetuating the problem. So let's not give Ubisoft a hard time for not including female playable characters in its assassin 'em up, and instead take it to task for its refusal to use its power to promote diversity across all of its series.
Keith Churchill

It's all the more disappointing given that Ubisoft is actually a little better at diversity than many of its publisher peers. *Assassin's Creed III* starred a Native American, its Vita spinoff *Liberation* was fronted by a French-African female, and the star of *Far Cry 4*'s boxart is Southeast Asian. With that track record you'd expect at least one of the four *Unity* co-op assassins to be female. As ever, the biggest disappointment of all is that something that should be a matter of course is instead, once again, a scandal.

Blue sky thinking

I had always considered myself a Nintendo fanboy of sorts. I'm too old for that sort of thing now, admittedly – perhaps 'loyalist' is the better word. However you choose to spin it, the fact remains that many of my favourite gaming memories have been on Nintendo systems. Leaping the fence with Epona in *Ocarina Of Time*. My first interplanetary transition in *Super Mario Galaxy*. Spending a hot summer's day in the school holidays staying indoors with the curtains closed finding all 96 exits in *Super Mario World*. Until very recently, Nintendo had been the sole consistent fixture throughout my gaming life.

Yet it rather lost me somewhere along the way. I didn't mind the Wii and DS era's focus on a casual audience – it was the right business decision to make, and there were enough 'traditional' games for the likes of me anyway. But Wii U has always left me cold. *NintendoLand* had none of the snappy immediacy of *Wii Sports*. The *New Super Mario Bros* games have always left me cold. And Nintendo's general outdated approach to the system – tying game purchases to a console instead of an account, the crazy pricing of Virtual Console games – has pushed me even further away from a purchase.

Then, slowly, came the games. A new 3D *Mario*, *Pikmin* and *Mario Kart*, the *Wind Waker* remake, and the promise of more to come. I was getting closer – and E3 pushed me over the edge. I'd watched the Monday press conferences with a sort of glazed-eye detachment, unmoved by the endless procession of CG and explosions and dismemberments. And then came Nintendo with *Splatoon*, *Yoshi's Woolly World*, *Mario Maker* and *Zelda*, and I was reminded why I started playing games in the first place.

I bought a Wii U the next weekend, and it's been a delight. Nintendo might never again reach the financial heights of Wii and DS, but it has won me back. And from talking to friends, it appears the tide is slowly turning. It might never match PS4's sales, but as long as Wii U sells well enough for Nintendo to keep doing what it does better than anyone else on the planet, I, and many others, will be right there with them.
Gareth Lewis

And yet you're never more than three months away from a new set of financial results and a week of shareholders telling Nintendo to change its ways and to more closely follow the latest industry trends. If this year's E3 taught us anything at all, it's that Nintendo feels like it's at its very best when it sticks to its guns.

PlayStation's new clothes

It's lucky for Ready At Dawn that there's no such thing as a disappointed PlayStation fan – four shit games into the *Killzone* series and they're still trying to tell me it's a *Halo* killer – because *The Order: 1886* wouldn't sell half a million if it was sold on a platform where it had to pick a fight with *Gears Of War* or even bloody *Splatoon*.

The E3 stage demo was a comical display. A man walked forward, a cutscene played, the man fired his gun with no effect, a cutscene played, he fired his gun again, cut to black, applause. It's nice that American journalists are so enthusiastic and everything, but what's to applaud?

The eight-year-old mechanics on loan from *Gears Of War*, perhaps, or maybe the 20 seconds of interactivity in a two-minute sequence? Perhaps it's the game's art direction and its – admittedly very beautiful – version of a war-torn London? It was beautiful back in *Gears Of War*, too. Or maybe it's the super-widescreen 1,920x800 resolution, which *Ready At Dawn* will tell you is cinematic, and any engineer will tell you just makes it much easier to squeeze all those details onto the screen. Just ask Shinji Mikami about *Resident Evil 4*'s 'cinematic' GameCube resolution.

Admittedly, I'm an old man – I remember seeing **Edge** advertised in GamesMaster, for heaven's sake – but haven't we been here too many times before? When players say they want a next-gen *Gears Of War*, they don't mean they want a *next-gen Gears Of War*; they want a game that does for this generation what *Gears* did for the last by setting the visual and mechanical benchmarks that will last almost a decade. That game isn't *The Order*. *Sunset Overdrive*, maybe. Maybe *Destiny*. Or perhaps even *No Man's Sky*?

Whatever. *The Order* is a PlayStation game. I predict a Metacritic average of 80, with **Edge**'s review score dragging the singleformat sites and mags down from their tens like a boat anchor.
Nicholas Best

Perhaps when people ask for a next-gen *Gears Of War* they mean a game that sets a new graphical benchmark for the platform to which it is exclusive. You may yet be right about *The Order*'s reviews, though. In the meantime, perhaps some new Turtle Beach hardware will help you chill out a little. ■



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

Everyone's always going on about how playing videogames makes you a serial killer, but it can also make you a real-life anti-establishment hero – at least if you believe what NSA file leaker Edward Snowden told the journalist Glenn Greenwald, as Greenwald relates in his book about the affair. Snowden, he says, learned several moral lessons from videogames. One was this: "The protagonist is often an ordinary person who finds himself faced with grave injustices from powerful forces and has the choice to flee in fear or to fight for his beliefs." The protagonist is also often an elf or a spaceship, but let's not quibble.

An era that boasts poster-boy hackers such as Snowden and Assange is ripe for the release of a videogame such as *Watch Dogs*, which has baseball-cap-wearing supernerd Aiden Pearce for a protagonist, a hacker with a pop of fashionable orange in the lining of his coat. Oddly, Pearce has to glance down at his phone when performing his tricks of municipal manipulation. Wouldn't any self-respecting paranoid supernerd these days be wearing Google Glass so that crucial HUD information could be floating in front of his face at all times? Notably, Pearce doesn't have to glance at the phone to have an always-on map of his surroundings or see the target icons overlaid on people and vehicles. The ambient information exists in two modes for no good narrative reason. And hacking is just a matter of pressing a button, or at its most elaborate – if you have to hack something like a security router – a minigame involving rotating circuit nodes. What, seriously? Connecting the wires? Presumably even your average NSA contractor has more sophisticated challenges than this.

The real ideological disconnect, however, is that Pearce's hacker's revenge depends on him having the powers of total surveillance – even, or especially, over innocuous ordinary citizens roaming around their moodily clean version of Chicago – that real-life hacker hero Snowden deplores when those powers are in the hands of the NSA. To be fair to Snowden, actually, he doesn't think anyone should have those powers. He has said he had them himself while a contractor: "You could read anyone's email in the world. Anybody you've got email address for. Any website, you can watch traffic to and from it; any computer that an individual sits at, you can watch it; any laptop that you're tracking, you can follow it as it moves from place to place throughout the world." But then he gave up those powers in order to leak the material.



Pearce uses a phone, but wouldn't any self-respecting paranoid supernerd be wearing Google Glass?

Aiden Pearce, on the other hand, revels in being the watcher at the centre of his digital panopticon. The game's hacking mechanic can be interpreted, firstly, as an interesting mode of power fantasy. Sure, power can come from guns and other lethal gadgets (as it also does here), but in a modern first-world city, where so much is electronically controlled, remote power over cameras, traffic lights and trains is arguably more impressive. In its best moments, *Watch Dogs* presents the illusion that you can bend an entire city to your will.

But another part of the game's pleasure, more troublingly, is predicated on the sheer voyeuristic thrill of uncovering snippets of personal data about passers-by ("Suffers from claustrophobia", "Collects cans and bottles"), which in a sense makes the game an advert for applying to the NSA, rather than a critical comment on modern surveillance society. Curiously, too, the game doesn't punish you for incontinently stealing cash from everyone you pass in the street, which arguably leaves a bad taste in the mouth.

What's most interesting about this intersection between news and electronic fiction, perhaps, is that the NSA itself seemed to take no small amount of rhetorical inspiration from videogames when bigging up its own digital superpowers. According to one leaked slide, the agency's "New Collection Posture" gave videogamey monikers to its exciting data-hoovering capabilities. "Analysis of data at scale: ELEGANTCHAOS" (a pretty good description of, say, *Titanfall*). "Sniff it All: Torus increases physical access" inevitably evoked an image of doughnut-shaped portals enabling me to walk through walls, while "Know it All: Automated FORNSAT survey – DARKQUEST" clearly pictures NSA analysts as wielding massive swords to defeat spooky medieval giant knights in underlit caves. If government hackers aspire to be like videogame characters, then they'll be more delighted than anyone when videogames return the compliment by portraying hackers as heroes.

Steven Poole's Trigger Happy 2.0 is now available from Amazon. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net

Illustration **marshdavies.com**



IAN BOGOST

Difficulty Switch

Hard game criticism

Stay In The Line is a simple mobile game by Barry Wyckoff in which you trace a path through a series of scrolling obstacles to reach a goal. As I write this, the game is the number one free game on the US App Store charts. By the time you read these words, however, something else will have taken its place.

After all, another simple game by a guy you've never heard of topped the charts a month earlier: Hu Wen Zeng's *Don't Tap The White Tile* (later renamed *Piano Tiles*). In *Piano Tiles*, the player races across a chequered course by tapping only black squares. Two weeks later, a slick, weird game called *Make It Rain* was a free charts hit – in it, you swipe bills from a money clip to earn money to swipe bills more rapidly. Giedrius Talzunas's *100 Balls* also hit number one for a week or so, and the cannabis-dealing title *Weed Firm* topped the charts just as briefly before Apple pulled it from the store (presumably for being a number one game about weed).

While such games have existed forever, their success has accelerated in the wake of Dong Nguyen's free mobile juggernaut, *Flappy Bird*. As in Nguyen's case, many of these hits are created by a single individual or a small team, some of whom have only been making games for a short time. An easy conclusion is tempting: the App Store marketplace as the realisation of the independent game creator's dream. Obscure, inexperienced developers can become famous overnight after spending mere days creating a title. And wealthy, too – media coverage of hit games such as *Flappy Bird* and *Make It Rain* never fails to mention that they might be taking in up to $50k per day from ads and micropayments.

These fast-rising free mobile games are different from other mobile hits. Unlike *Candy Crush Saga*, *Clash Of Clans* and *Angry Birds*, games like *Stay In The Line* and *Make It Rain* don't stick around. They get replaced at the top of the charts quickly – almost every week – with subsequent, more rapid, drops in ranking following. Had Nguyen not pulled





Games like 100 Balls are food trucks. They're always there in the same convenient place, but switch out regularly

Flappy Bird at the height of its popularity, it too might have fallen from grace.

In the past, fast-burn games keyed off current events or popular controversies as a way of garnering attention (my collaborators and I called such specimens "tabloid games" in our book on newsgames). Tabloid games offer a momentary joke, a one-off gag done as linkbait with little concern for craft. By contrast, the most popular free mobile games exhibit some of the properties we normally associate with good design. For example, these titles sport bottomless gameplay and substantial level design – it's always possible to improve your score in *Flappy Bird*, your time in *Piano Tiles*, or your progress in *Stay In The Line*. But, given their effective shelf life, most players will never really plumb the depths of those designs. Instead, they'll pick up another similar game a few days later.

How might we characterise this genre? These games offer bite-size experiences that are long-lasting in theory but temporary in practice. Years ago, marketers and theorists talked about our tendency to 'graze' or 'snack' on small pieces of media across many channels, but 'snack' implies a soulless marketplace of selfsame packaged goods.

Stay In The Line and *Flappy Bird* aren't mass-produced throwaways (snacks), but they also aren't pretentious indie games (haute cuisine), nor are they massmarket casual titles (fast food). Sticking with the eating metaphor, we might compare these games to 'fast casual' eateries such as Le Pain Quotidien or Chipotle or POD. In its food services sense, 'fast casual' implies higher quality and fresher ingredients combined with the quick service experience of fast food. In its videogame incarnation, game design quality is higher, but it is mated to rapid play and limited commitment.

Still, the fast casual comparison suggests a chain store repeatability that doesn't match the funky individualism of the titles at hand. I'll indulge in one more food metaphor, then: games such as *Flappy Bird* and *100 Balls* are the food trucks of videogames. They're always there in the same convenient place, but they switch out regularly for the sake of variety. They provide wholesome, quality offerings at reasonable cost. And they offer an individual character missing from more polished, industrialised options. These games are weird and rough, but they are also real – in the sense that they have soul, and that they involve an authentic exchange between individuals. That's a spice that even modern indie games increasingly shun.

Ian Bogost is an author and game designer. His award-winning A Slow Year *is available at www.bit.ly/1eQalad*

Illustration **marshdavies.com**



NATHAN BROWN

Big Picture Mode

Industry issues given the widescreen treatment

When our copy of *Wolfenstein: The New Order* arrived in the post for review, it came with a bullet-pointed list of instructions. This included limitations on video capture, requests not to live stream the game and to deactivate its activity settings on PS4, plus the timing of the review embargo. It's standard stuff in an era when even a game's Achievements are considered spoilers by some, and we're used to it. Punters, however, aren't, and I felt for the forum user whose online order of *Wolfenstein* turned up a couple of days early, before the embargo had lifted. Mindful of how many of his fellow posters were on the fence about the game, and with the review embargo yet to lift, he hit the Share button on his DualShock 4 and started streaming. Within a couple of hours, his Twitch account had been suspended. He'd broken an embargo to which he had never agreed.

This is a new low. It needlessly punishes a player who bought the game in good faith. It undermines the online retailers whose reputations have been built on getting games into eager players' hands a day or two before release. And most of all, it harms the game, serving only to put off the potential players who are already suspicious enough of the embargo's timing. They're shutting down streams now? It must be terrible.

Whenever a big new release has an 11th-hour embargo, it is immediately assumed the game is going to be rough, that publishers are trying to withhold the truth about its quality until it is too late to cancel your preorder. That might be true in some cases, but embargoes are designed to serve more than just corporate cover-ups. Ensuring that all the outlets sent early code are working to the same deadline means none of them can rush up a review for the sake of being first and getting all that sweet Internet traffic. That, in turn, protects players from basing a purchasing decision on a half-formed critique. And for publishers, it's not just about burying bad news until it's too late to matter, but also guaranteeing a broad media presence that reminds the less engaged that a game exists and is now on shelves.



Illustration marshdavies.com

The culture of mistrust between player and publisher is only going to worsen until someone comes up with a solution

Release-day embargoes do, however, reinforce the belief that the gaming press is simply another cog in the big publishers' marketing machine – that we are too scared of being denied future access and advertising spend to disobey them. Open any forum thread discussing a game's review scores and you'll find people claiming they no longer trust the press, and put more stock in fellow posters' impressions than those of a bent so-called 'journalist'.

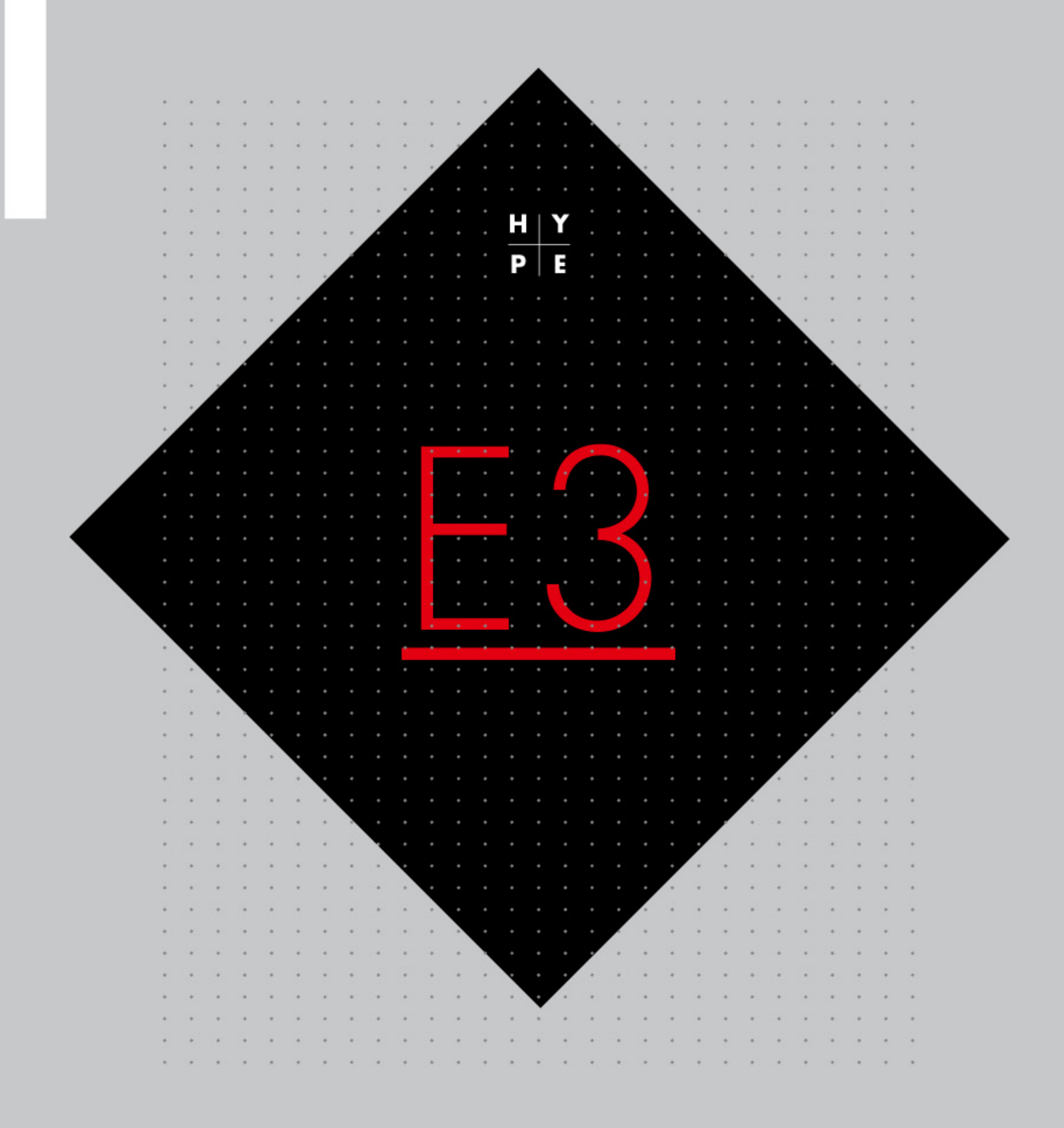
Yet that doesn't work either, and *Watch Dogs* is a fine recent example of why. Through a combination of PC piracy, high-street indies willing to break street date for a sale and online retailers, social media was awash with impressions of the game several days before the review embargo lifted. Naturally, they were all over the place. My favourite was the fellow who posted one night to say it was dreadful, the next morning to say it was at best a six out of ten, and then was back later that evening to say he'd been playing it all day and was rather enjoying himself. What is the fellow potential buyer whose mouse is hovering over the 'Cancel preorder' button on Amazon supposed to do with that?

Ubisoft's botched marketing of *Watch Dogs* has been fascinating anyway. There was the 11th-hour delay, announced so late that it prompted accusations of being deliberately withheld until players couldn't cancel the PS4 hardware bundle they'd preordered; the graphical downgrade from the game's announcement at E3 2012; and the now-infamous Paris preview event where attendees were sent away with assets stored on Google Nexus 7s. All gave the suspicious still more grounds to believe Ubisoft was sitting on a stinker. A review embargo timed to lift at a minute past midnight (on the US West Coast, of course) on the day of release only made matters worse.

In an era of digital releases and day-one patches, developers are working on games until much closer to launch than in the halcyon days where finished games shipped on discs. As such, review code is going out later and later. Meanwhile, players are being asked to commit to a purchase earlier than ever. There's no easy answer, but the culture of mistrust between player and publisher is only going to worsen until someone comes up with a solution. No longer punishing your paying customers with account bans seems like a logical place to start.

Nathan Brown is **Edge***'s games editor. All opinions expressed are embargoed until 00:01 PST on July 3, 2014*


T3
THE GREAT BRITISH
TECH
LIST
60 WAYS THE UK IS
CHANGING THE WORLD
FROM ASTON TO ZOPA
IN PRINT, ON TABLET AND SMARTPHONE
ON SALE NOW
Google play
App Store
zinio



THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS IN LA

BLOODBORNE

Publisher SCE **Developer** FromSoftware, Japan Studio **Format** PS4 **Release** Q1 2015

As soon as we see the backstep, we know. Further evidence follows: a jumping power attack, a kick that breaks an enemy's shield, a corpse bearing the telltale glow of an item pickup. Still, it's when we first see *Bloodborne*'s protagonist shimmy back out of the way of an attack that we know those rumours of a PS4-exclusive *Demon's Souls* sequel weren't so far off the mark. It's another collaboration between FromSoftware and Sony's Japan Studio, *Demon's Souls* and *Dark Souls* director Hidetaka Miyazaki is at the helm, and his team began work on the game after finishing *Dark Souls' Artorias Of The Abyss* DLC. It's a *Souls* game in all but name.

Which isn't to say that the title is simply a smokescreen. *Souls* games are thematically and mechanically about death, but are not particularly bloody: the fallen slump lifelessly to the ground, but only a handful of moves ever draw red. In that sense, at least, *Bloodborne* couldn't been more different. When our protagonist first sinks his blade into an enemy's chest, a river of claret spurts out of the hole and onto his long-tailed coat. Ten minutes later, he's wringing wet with the stuff – a consequence, perhaps, of the parameters being changed for the convenience of our tight E3 schedule to give the player infinite health, but the change is striking nonetheless.

Blood will, like the souls of the fallen in Miyazaki's previous two games, be vital both to the story and the player's role within it. Details are characteristically vague; the new FromSoftware president has the same approach to interview responses as he does to game design, which has always been equal parts charming and infuriating. Still, it appears blood sucked from corpses will restore health. Take too much, however, and you'll become a beast, and harder to control. It's *Bloodborne*'s equivalent of the *Souls* games' human/hollow system, in other words, and makes for a fitting summary of what *Bloodborne* sets out to do: tell much the same story in a slightly different way.

The setting is Yharnam, a foreboding, Gothic spin on Victorian London in the grip of a plague that turns the afflicted into hideous beasts. The remaining population – whose members are, like *Dark Souls*' Hollows, unaware that they too are succumbing to the very same illness – hunts their former members en masse, summoned into battle by the town bell. It's a device that not only immediately evokes fond memories of the early game in both *Dark Souls* and *Resident Evil 4,* but also has significant consequences for how *Bloodborne* will play.

Yharnam's hostile townsfolk will move around, meaning this will not be an enemy-placement memory test but a world that carries a constant, shifting threat. Miyazaki hasn't changed a bit, however: in one section, as we ▶



Given the extent to which *Dark Souls*' rhythm could be changed with different gear, we're eager to see how much scope there is for more cautious play. Giving the player a shield would make a huge difference



Not all boss battles will be preceded by the *Souls* games' fog gates. Miyazaki wants to surprise players again, and one demo boss leapt out at us as we were innocently crossing a cobbled Yharnam street



follow a group of citizens that's shuffling towards a town-square pyre, we're shot in the back by an enemy lurking in the shadows.

The *Souls* games were about facing isolated pockets of resistance. The threat ramped up in *Dark Souls II*, but you'd never draw the ire of more than one mob at a time, with one group pulling back as you aggroed the next. Here, however, Miyazaki says that the enemy threat will continue to grow unless you deal with it quickly. The result is a move away from the slow pace of *Demon's* and *Dark Souls* – this is not a game of hanging back with your shield up waiting for a dimwitted Hollow to make a mistake and create an opening. You need to take the initiative.

You've certainly got the tools to be more aggressive. When footage of *Bloodborne* – then known by its internal code name *Project Beast* – appeared in the run-up to E3, the presence of a gun in the protagonist's left hand was taken as a sign that there would be a greater emphasis on ranged combat. The reality, at least in this demo, is that it's a stylistic decision, not a gameplay tweak. It's a shotgun, and as such is most useful up close, staggering an opponent a few frames just before his hammer crashes into our skull, a subsequent press of R1 performing a brutal two-hit combo with our right-hand blade. It's a canned animation, like a *Dark Souls* backstab or riposte, and just as damaging as those moves. And while the HUD has been disabled in our demo, it seems logical that firing a gun will use less stamina than swinging a sword, making it an invaluable aid when under pressure, buying you precious seconds of stamina recharge.

In the protagonist's right hand, meanwhile, is a weapon that proves equally transformative for Miyazaki's combat template. With a single button press it changes form, folding over from a jagged longsword to become a blunt instrument that can hit with enough force to break an opponent's guard. It's a design that gives you much more control over the situation, powering a pacier combat rhythm in which you are meant to be more proactive than reactive, and removing the need to burden yourself with multiple weapons suited to different situations.

FromSoftware is targeting 1080p and 30fps, but on this early evidence the former seems more achievable than the latter. It's a handsome game – a generational leap by the studio's standards, even if that isn't saying much – but it doesn't run fluidly. A well-trained Sony producer reminds us that this is unoptimised alpha code seconds before the framerate plunges into single digits. Anyone who's ever trekked through *Dark Souls'* Blighttown on 360 will tell you that From has never been the most technically proficient studio, and it is in this regard that Japan Studio's involvement will be especially welcome. That aside, this is vintage FromSoftware: a perilous trek through the crumbling buildings and dark corners of a once-beautiful land now in the grip of something unspeakably horrid.

Torches are an odd sight after the fuss over *Dark Souls II*'s lighting. PS4's power should mean From won't need to compromise this time

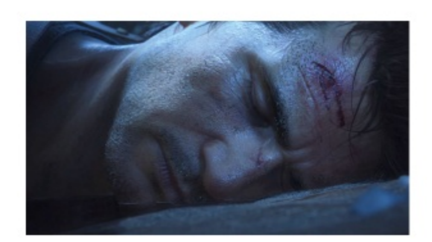
This first taste has only left us hungry for more and with more questions than answers, which is precisely how Miyazaki would want it. *Bloodborne* clearly has more than a development team in common with the *Souls* games, and so it will be defined by what it does differently: its combat, its world, how it handles gear, checkpointing and multiplayer. Yet already, Miyazaki and FromSoftware have taken the biggest generational leap of all, going from cult classic to the centre of Sony's stage, from hardcore curio to the most exciting announcement of E3.



Yharnam (above) is a dark, disquieting place, with none of the beauty of, say, *Dark Souls*' Anor Londo. The final game is sure to surprise, however

OLD SOULS

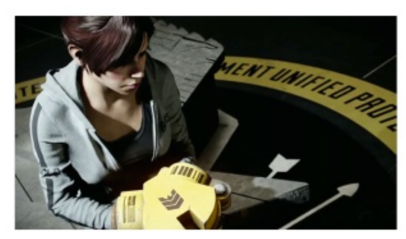
***Bloodborne*'s announcement may have immediately aged *Dark Souls II* by a generation, but while Miyazaki's team works on the PS4 game, elsewhere within From Software work continues on one of its spiritual predecessors. *The Lost Crowns* is a three-part DLC programme whose first instalment, *Crown Of The Sunken King*, launches on July 22. Our E3 hands-on, however, was quite the disappointment. Set in a drab underground ruin with a gimmicky hook in which you hit pillars to raise and lower parts of the environment, *Dark Souls II*'s first DLC introduces just a few new enemy types, one of which is a powered-up version of the main game's infuriating poison-spitting statues. It ran terribly, too. There's time to sort that out, at least, and what From has shown of the rest of the trilogy looks a little more promising. You'll be able to try before you buy, since the game will allow co-op summons of those who don't own the DLC.**



UNCHARTED 4: A THIEF'S END

Publisher SCE **Developer** Naughty Dog
Format PS4 **Release** TBC

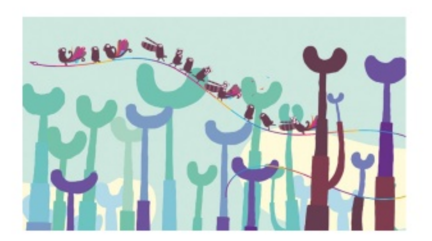
Nathan Drake's crow's feet and greying locks are as much a product of PS4's rendering power as *Uncharted*'s narrative arc, but the blemished face presented at E3 was enough to create lines in our own brow. The foliage-heavy reveal was captured in-engine and running on PS4, but it seems unlikely that in-game characters will sport quite this level of fidelity (consider the difference between *Infamous: Second Son*'s playable and cutscene models). Even so, Drake will be able to navigate and fight his way through the world in a variety of new ways thanks to an expanded moveset that will allow for "deeper and richer gameplay mechanics", but not at the cost of the series' epic set-pieces and rollercoaster pace. Naughty Dog is aiming to more closely mesh onscreen action with story, too, and the tale sees Drake forced back into a life of thievery.



INFAMOUS: FIRST LIGHT

Publisher SCE **Developer** Sucker Punch
Format PS4 **Release** August

First Light is a standalone prequel and origin story to Sucker Punch's open-world PS4 adventure *Second Son*. It casts you as Abigail 'Fetch' Walker, eventual companion to Delsin, in the period leading up to the pair meeting for the first time. Starting after she is captured by DUP forces and taken to high-security Conduit prison Curdun Cay, you'll get to explore the facility and the mountainous, snow-covered landscape that surrounds it, as well as tackle Seattle with new Neon powers. *First Light*'s story will follow Fetch's descent into drug abuse, nihilism and, when her brother Brent goes missing, revenge. While you won't need the original game to play it, those who do have *Second Son* will be able to access exclusive content, and aesthetes will be pleased to hear that the game's popular photo mode will also be included in the download.



HOHOKUM

Publisher SCE **Developer** Honeyslug
Format PS3, PS4, Vita **Release** August 12 (NA), 13 (EU)

Some games make for better demos than others, and *Hohokum* is in the latter camp. We're a sort of kite with a long tail and an eye; one button makes us go fast, another slows us down, a third closes our eye. We flit around. Gigantic kidney beans turn into insects that flutter off the top of the screen. An elephant strides languidly from right to left. People sit on its back, and a cage dangles from its tail. We press buttons hopefully. Nothing. We are late for our next appointment. Trying to play *Hohokum* amid the bombast of a busy E3 is like watching someone who has never seen a game before play *Noby Noby Boy* at a Skrillex show. Still, it looks delightful, the Ghostly International soundtrack is a wonderful accompaniment, and we can't wait to fathom the unfathomable at our own pace when *Hohokum* releases in August.



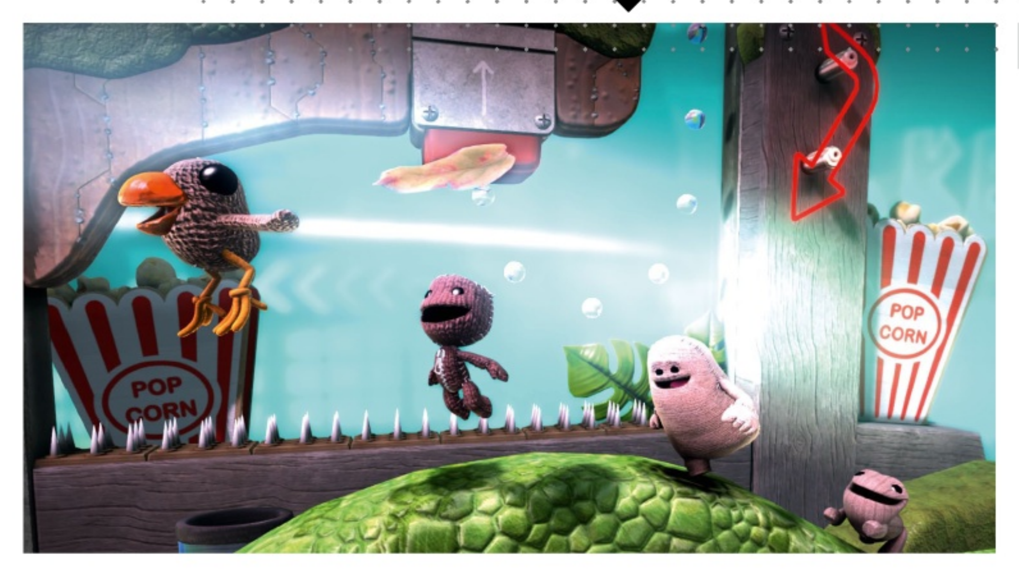
The right stick pans the camera, and planning ahead is key. The tents on the right here will keep spawning enemy troops until you destroy them

GUNS UP

Publisher SCE **Developer** Valkyrie Entertainment **Format** PS3, PS4, Vita **Release** 2014

Don't let the art style fool you: *Guns Up* is a violent game. Flesh-stripped corpses ragdoll through the air, and the fallen splatter the ground with blood. And many will fall. In this side-scrolling, free-to-play RTS, everyone is expendable. You won't mind, either, since developer Valkyrie Entertainment is generous with bullets, the resource you spend on units. You start with 5,000, and unit costs range from 50 for a squad of riflemen to 500 for a sniper or heavy machine gunner, but you'll pick up more almost as quickly as you can spend them. Special abilities – tear-gas clouds, land mines, air strikes, guided missiles and so on – ensure you're doing more than just sending in a stream of cannon fodder. You can order units to focus fire on a target, or set rally points to coordinate assaults.

Valkyrie has done a fine job retooling the RTS for console, with units and abilities selected from two rows at the bottom of the screen, and item drops collected with a tap of Square. Things move along at pace, too, and the game will sport online and base-building components with Cross-Play across PS3, PS4 and Vita. As with all F2P games, monetisation is the big concern, however. One of 25 free-to-play titles coming to PlayStation platforms, *Guns Up* is due later this year, and you can sign up for an early-access beta at Valkyrie's website.



Introducing characters with unique abilities suggests a shift away from platforming towards a more puzzle-based design. That's just as well given the number of botched jumps during Sony's E3 stage demo

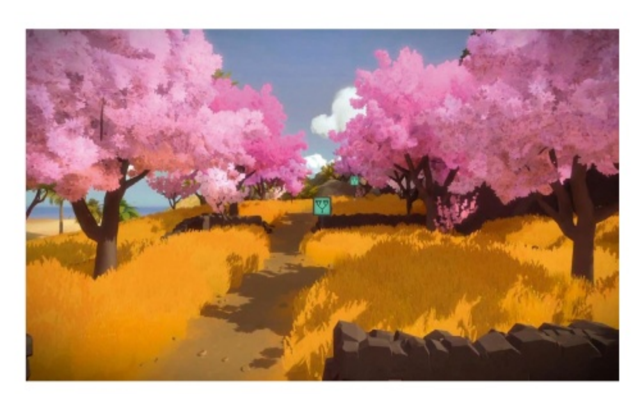
LITTLEBIGPLANET 3

Publisher SCE **Developer** Sumo Digital **Format** PS3, PS4 **Release** November

With Media Molecule working on its secretive Move project, development of *LittleBigPlanet 3* has fallen to Sumo Digital. Sumo already has form with the series, having worked on 2012's *Cross-Controller Pack* (which lets you play *LBP2* on Vita), but this will be the first time that a company other than Media Molecule has handled a major entry in the series.

Sumo is making its mark with the introduction of several new playable characters, each with their own abilities. Swoop, a bird, can fly to otherwise out-of-reach areas and carry other characters with him; Toggle can change between Big Toggle and Little Toggle at will, allowing him to, say, sink to the bottom of water when large or walk across its surface when small; Oddsock, meanwhile, looks like an elongated toad and can wall jump. None of Sackboy's new friends exude the charm of the original character, but the wealth of co-op gameplay possibilities they present are obvious.

Sackboy hasn't been left behind by his new companions, either. He can now climb parts of the environment (cargo nets, for example), and will also have access to four new power-ups, although Sumo has so far only revealed the Pumpinator, an air gun that can be used to manipulate environmental elements, pushing objects and turning wheels, for example.



THE WITNESS

Publisher/developer Thekla, Inc
Format iOS, PC, PS4 (timed exclusive) **Release** 2014

Two weeks before E3 started, lead designer Jonathan Blow and his team decided to tear down the game's opening area – the part that everyone would be playing – and rebuild it from scratch. The new castle section is much smaller than the one we saw last year, pulling its path-finding labyrinthine puzzles closer together in line with the team's philosophy that there should be as many ideas packed into the smallest space possible throughout the game. There are now 627 puzzles jammed into the modest-sized island, which should offer 30 hours of gameplay. The starting area redesign allowed for more subtle changes, too, such as reworked vegetation that's grouped in different combinations to help with navigation. Blow also showed off a later section that involved using carved holes in a building's wall to trace a line through the puzzles behind it.



SINGSTAR: ULTIMATE PARTY

Publisher/developer SCE (London Studios)
Format PS3, PS4 **Release** TBC

For its PS4 debut, *Singstar* is freeing itself of microphone peripherals. The ones buried in attics across the country will still work – well, probably – but if you don't have any to hand, you'll be able to download an iOS or Android app to turn your phone into a mic and also allow you to cue up playlists on both PS3 and PS4. It's a smart move that, while removing some of the theatre, also reduces the cost and the hassle of playing. There will be a digital and physical release of the game, the disc including its own 30-track playlist, and more songs will, of course, be available from the SingStore. Terrifyingly, game director Chris Bruce has said that the team is working on ways to make sharing your performances to Twitter and Facebook even easier than using the Share button, threatening a torrent of off-key snippets in your news feed.

THE ORDER: 1886

Publisher SCE **Developer** Ready At Dawn **Format** PS4 **Release** February 2015



Ah, so that's why they did it. Much has been made of Ready At Dawn's decision to present *The Order: 1886* in a bordered 2.40:1 aspect ratio. Yet by running at what is effectively 1920x800 (the image is technically 1080p with 140 lines of black at the top and bottom of the screen), PS4 need only draw a piffling 1,536,000 pixels at once, 25 per cent fewer than if it were running at an HDTV's native resolution. The result is that *The Order: 1886* was among the prettiest games at E3.

It was also one of the dullest. Ready At Dawn's cinematic aspirations are plain to see in more than just this brief playable demo's aspect ratio, or even its film grain presentation. Game director **Dana Jan** infamously put the studio's priorities in stark context ("gameplay is something that… it's a game, we make games, we can't get around it") and the preference for spectacle over systems is obvious.

The sight of a man getting shot, you see, is a bit boring. Someone points, and there's a sound, and someone else falls over. That's not good enough for Ready At Dawn, which has instead based its heavily *Gears Of War*-inspired cover shooter on the sight of top-hatted steampunk Victorian bandits being burned alive.

When the demo begins, we take cover behind a pillar under attack from some enemies across the street. Play traditionally – aim down the sights, line up a headshot and squeeze R2 to fire – and your quarry falls over as you'd expect, but is soon back on his feet. All you've fired is a cloud of thermite dust. R1 fires a flare that sets the cloud, and those nearby, on fire. It certainly looks marvellous, a bright flare of reds and oranges fizzing with particle sparks and soundtracked by the cockney screams of the roasting, but it quickly grows repetitive and is quite brainless. It's even more basic when you realise that by reversing the process and firing the flare before the thermite, there's not even any need for precision aiming. Just lodge the flare in the scenery and watch the fireworks.

The demo has slightly more to offer, and all of it feels drably familiar. We drag a downed ally indoors from a cobbled street, using our free hand to fend off pursuers with a pistol. Once inside, we pointlessly pick up and rotate a map before wandering a room's four walls in search of a QTE prompt. The technology's there, and a short demo gives no indication of whether Ready At Dawn is the storyteller it claims to be, but the studio's priorities are plainly, depressingly evident.

Isabeau D'Argyll made for a refreshing sight at an E3 dominated by debate over gender balance. Her role in the demo was minimal, sadly



The game takes place in 1984 in the English countryside. It's an uncommon setting for a game – for now. Games developed in the UK will only qualify for tax relief if they are deemed to be culturally British

EVERYBODY'S GONE TO THE RAPTURE

Publisher SCE **Developer** The Chinese Room **Format** PS4 **Release** 2015

Like Lars Von Trier's film Melancholia, *Everybody's Gone To The Rapture* explores the minutiae of people's lives in the context of the end of the world. Around *Rapture*'s bucolic open world are seeded echoes from the past – snippets of conversation or even a heated argument from a time when this segment of 1984 England wasn't abandoned. And you're free to explore at your leisure, discovering areas and stories as you choose.

It's also your decision as to whether you follow these echoes' movements around the world once they begin, or listen to only the beginning and leave. If you do this, though, you won't be able to go back and restart the event. You can also tune what you're listening to by tilting the DualShock, allowing you to choose between multiple conversations.

While it seems you are the last human left on Earth, you'll encounter five AI characters as you progress. The first is a glowing ball that, when approached, will lead you to particular stories in the world. Co-directors Dan Pinchbeck and Jessica Curry want you to form relationships with these characters as you become more interested in what they're trying to show you. While *Rapture*, like *Dear Esther*, is all about delivering a narrative, giving players the agency to experience it as they choose should make for a significantly more intriguing journey.



GRIM FANDANGO

Publisher SCE **Developer** Double Fine
Format PS4, Vita **Release** TBC

Can it really be true? After 15 years, Double Fine is finally updating *Grim Fandango*'s drivers to run on operating systems created after Windows 98. But perhaps not the ones you'd expect: the much-requested update of **Tim Schafer**'s noirish adventure game classic will be debuting on PS4 and Vita. This might be galling news to the PC players who've spent so long campaigning for the game's return, but in a Tweet posted after the announcement, Schafer said that Double Fine would "talk about other platforms soon". The game will receive a HD makeover, but there's no word yet as to whether its controversial tank controls will be revised – some touchscreen functionality will surely feature, though. Irrespective of what the final package looks like, we're dying to spend some more time in the Land Of The Dead with a spruce Manny, Glottis et al.



LET IT DIE

Publisher GungHo Online Entertainment **Developer** Grasshopper Manufacture
Format PS4 **Release** 2015

Let It Die (formerly *Lily Bergamo*) was so unprepared for its E3 showing that developer Grasshopper and publisher GungHo sent Goichi 'Suda 51' Suda and Kazuki Morishita – along with the game's creative director and a phalanx of marketing and PR staff – to LA without anything but a live-action trailer interspersed with tantalising glimpses of gameplay. Details about this free-to-play survival-action title are still short, but we do know it's a hack-and-slash game in which scavenged weapons will offer new combos and movesets, and every death will send your character to the cloud, which is where GungHo's online expertise steps in. Out in the online ether, your dead character will exist as a ghost, invading other worlds and – in ways the pair are keeping secret – returning rewards to your new character for every life they take.

FORZA HORIZON 2

Publisher Microsoft **Developer** Playground (Turn 10, Sumo Digital) **Format** 360, Xbox One **Release** September 30



The showpiece of Microsoft's conference was *Forza Horizon 2*, its physically rendered surfaces splashed with water, reflecting light cast through a simulated atmosphere that makes its European setting not only uncannily realistic but beautifully otherworldly.

While *Forza Motorsport* pathologically replicates reality, *Horizon* takes reality as far as it's fun and then goes wild. *Forza 5*'s physics model underpins the handling, but don't let that stop you taking a Lamborghini off-road through a vineyard or deep into a forest. It defies mechanics but embraces sheer enjoyment, and *Horizon*'s open world is truly open for the first time, placing no artificial barriers between your car and an off-road scramble.

While *Forza 5* lost tracks and features to make Xbox One's launch, *Horizon 2* is bigger than its 2012 precursor in every way, with a dynamic weather system complementing the day/night cycle, physically rendered surfaces that will 'absorb' water according to their porousness, and the full tuning system that developer Playground was forced to cut from *Horizon*.

Playground has also finally come to terms with calling the game's style system 'Kudos', if only informally. *Horizon*'s take on *Project Gotham*'s Kudos points has grown to offer perks for stylish driving, conferring metagame rewards such as increased cash for selling liveries and tuning setups rather than in-game cheats. In between dropping the word 'kudos', creative director **Ralph Fulton** speaks highly of *Motorsport 5*'s Drivatar system, too – "the benchmark by which all racing game AI will be measured" – and seems to recognise the impact of his simple promise that *Horizon 2* will have none of the microtransaction systems players hated in *Forza 5*.

Friends' Drivatars will populate the world to be challenged and raced, or followed to secrets their owner has discovered in their own game. One button press will take your game online, seamlessly synchronising your time of day and weather with a friend's game and spawning you in their world without a loading time or even a pause.

The Lamborghini Huracán (above) makes its videogame debut in *Horizon 2*. Microsoft brought the only Huracán in North America to its E3 stand, making it the revolving centrepiece of its *Forza Horizon* display

While others continue to struggle to make the Xbox One hardware sing, the Leamington Spa-based Playground has managed 1080p at a rock-solid 30fps in a sumptuous open world with physically rendered everything and a lighting system that's second to none. Like Naughty Dog working on PlayStation 3, then, the studio seems to have the magic key that unlocks the console's potential.



Horizon 2 sees the welcome introduction of weather, which will hopefully encourage Turn 10 to do the same for the *Motorsport* side of the *Forza* series

FABLE LEGENDS

Publisher Microsoft **Developer** Lionhead **Format** Xbox One **Release** 2015



Fable has always been that most British of games, a charmingly foppish riposte to the broad grizzled shoulders of Microsoft's US-centric Xbox lineup. Yet the series' Xbox One debut has seemingly been made with an outsider's view of the Sceptred Isle. Its clumsily animated cast – Sterling, the posho swordsman; Winter, the Home Counties ice maiden; Rook, the Scottish ranger; and Inga, the West Country tank – spout context-sensitive witticisms as they battle across Albion's fields and townships, but it's hard to imagine a born-and-bred Brit signing off on these accents. The final game will, we're told, feature many more playable fighters than the slender selection on offer on the show floor; here's hoping the end product sports less jarring voice work.

Yet Lionhead has more fundamental issues on its plate. Perhaps the biggest of all is that one person in this fiveplayer game has much more fun than the others. *Fable Legends* is at its best when you're the villain, laying traps, raising gates and spawning beasts to thwart the gang of four. The associated RTS controls have been smartly mapped to the Xbox One controller, which was the only way to play the game at E3 – presumably to counter the assumption following *Legends*' unveiling that villainy would be for SmartGlass players only.

On the battlefield, things are more messy, and we don't just mean Lionhead's signature wonky animation. The heroes might have all the requisite tools for the task at hand – Inga, for example, has a dodge roll, a right-trigger melee move, a shield for blocking and bashing, a spell that protects the group from ranged attacks, and a taunt to draw aggro – but using them is woolly and unsatisfying. There's no hitstun, so enemies wind up attacks while you're hammering away at them. That would be fine if you could only see what was going on, but it's hard to pick out movements when the screen is full of artillery and support spells. Communication is of paramount importance, but even the most organised teams suffer from all the clutter.

Combat has never been the best thing about *Fable*, yet for 80 per cent of players, it's all *Legends* has to offer. The series' trademark morality system has been relegated to a menu option, and, worse, has as good as been made for you by a design team that has combined a serviceable singleplayer RTS with a clunky fourplayer dungeon crawler. A multiplayer beta is due later this year: expect lengthy waits as everyone queues up to be the bad guy.

***Fable Legends* is unique among Microsoft's Xbox One lineup in Lionhead's use of a thirdparty engine. While 343, Turn 10 and Rare have their own bespoke tools, Lionhead favours Unreal Engine 4**



An explosion of colour and spectacle, ***Sunset Overdrive***'s E3 stage demo poked fun at the brown shooters of the past decade

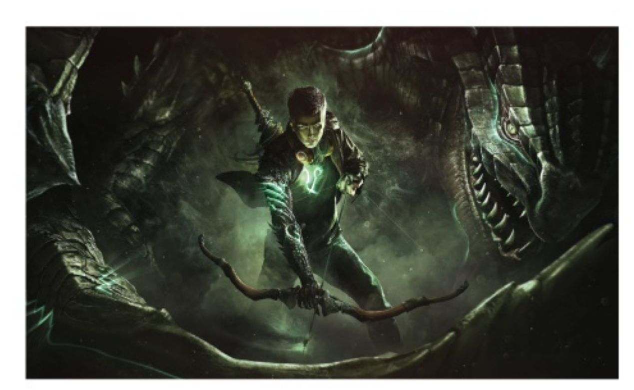
SUNSET OVERDRIVE

Publisher Microsoft **Developer** Insomniac **Format** Xbox One **Release** October 28

In the Galen Centre where Microsoft held its E3 conference, it was *Sunset Overdrive* that made the biggest impact. *Forza Horizon 2* was beautiful and *Scalebound* was surprising, but *Sunset Overdrive* was fun in a way modern games rarely are.

Ted Price's wildly theatrical performance, pointing at the crowd and insisting that each and every one of them will be the heroes of *Sunset Overdrive*, set the stage for a demo that comprised everyone's favourite parts of their favourite games: the springloaded leaps of *Mario*, the endless rail-grinds of *Jet Set Radio*, the vibrant colours of *Crazy Taxi*, the wall running of *Prince Of Persia*, and the sheer firepower of *Ratchet & Clank*. All of it is crammed into a game that would have been at home on Sega's Dreamcast in 1999.

It was Insomniac's chance to reveal the game's eightplayer co-op and set out its manifesto for this generation. The game's trailer was yet another gauntlet thrown down before the industry: a camo-clad soldier firing on shadowy enemies in a terminally brown warehouse, interrupted by the riotous explosion of colour and stupidity that defines *Sunset Overdrive*. Insomniac is daring the industry to follow it on a mystery tour back to videogames' golden age, and if nobody's brave enough to do so, then to at least offer something different.



SCALEBOUND

Publisher Microsoft **Developer** Platinum Games
Format Xbox One **Release** TBC

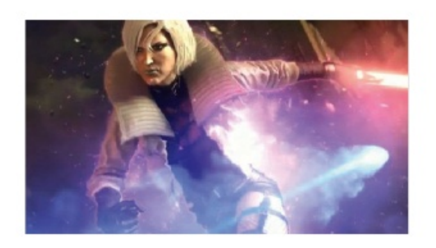
With Yusuke Hashimoto handling *Bayonetta 2*, series creator Hideki Kamiya has been freed to focus on a new project. *Scalebound* will pit the player against huge dragons and other creatures as you explore a hostile, *Monster Hunter*-esque world. You won't be alone, though, and are able to call upon your own giant, fire-breathing reptilian ally to even the odds. Early glimpses suggest that you will be flying into battle alongside friends, too, each riding their own colour-coded monsters. *Scalebound*'s predictably cocksure, platinum-blonde hero comes across like a mashup of Capcom and Ninja Theory's Dantes, winking at the camera and listening to music during battle through his Beats-like headphones. He's armed with a sword and bow, and can also deploy his own scaly armour – apparently triggered by making contact with his dragon.



FANTASIA: MUSIC EVOLVED

Publisher Disney Interactive **Developer** Harmonix
Format 360, Xbox One **Release** October 21

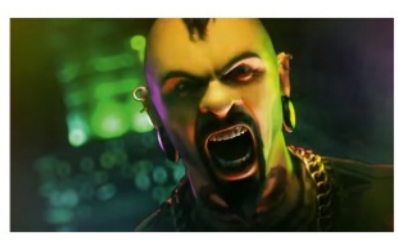
Kinect is dead, but was it ever really alive on Xbox One? Harmonix, at least, is flying the flag for Microsoft's all-seeing eye with both *Dance Central Spotlight*, a downloadable and expandable version of Kinect's best-ever game, and *Fantasia: Music Evolved*. The latter is a friendly, Disney-fied take on *Dance Central*'s formula, arguably proving Kinect is only good for gaming when a developer can compensate for the device's latency. By perfecting dance moves and gestures, players unlock new visual and audio themes for each of the game's popular tunes, but *Fantasia* offers no score and no way to lose. Instead it's a game about crafting your own musical and visual performance and sharing it with friends. It's proof of Kinect's limitations, certainly, but it also proves something else: in the hands of the right developer, its games really can feel like magic.



PHANTOM DUST

Publisher/developer Microsoft Game Studios
Format Xbox One **Release** TBA

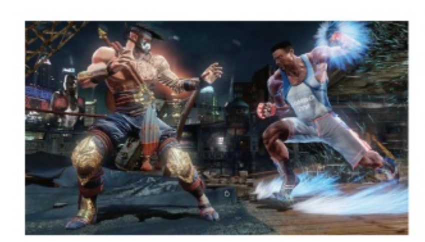
Better known for directing *Panzer Dragoon*, Yukio Futatsugi also created cult 2004 Xbox title *Phantom Dust*. It mixed online thirdperson action with card-battling elements, and now Xbox One will host a remake. Set in a future where the appearance of a memory-sapping dust has forced most humans underground, a select few have gained the ability to channel their thoughts into pure energy. Players can customise their arsenal by collecting and assigning skills like building a card deck, a clunky mechanic in the original that will be honed here. The 374 available skills are also being rebalanced to ensure that cards such as Psycho Sniper and Venom Fang are no longer overpowered. Although noncommittal, Ken Lobb has also been talking up *Killer Instinct* in the context of growing *Phantom Dust*, so expect a free-to-play model here too.



CRACKDOWN

Publisher Microsoft Game Studios **Developer** Cloudgine
Format Xbox One **Release** TBA

Even before the E3 reveal, the world had already seen the third *Crackdown* in motion. At Microsoft's Build conference in April, CVP Steve Guggenheimer and Microsoft Developer Platform Evangelism CTO John Shewchuk demoed a destructible environment in which structures were procedurally destroyed, crippling a high-end PC in the process, then the same demo again propped up by cloud processing, which maintained a steady framerate. The demo, it turns out, was an early tech prototype for a new *Crackdown*. The teaser at E3 features several agents working to topple a holed-up gang kingpin. Since he's behind a heaving layer of hi-tech security, they use explosives creatively to turn a nearby skyscraper into an improvised missile. It's a tad heavy-handed, but the prospect of reducing a city to cloud-powered shrapnel is intoxicating.



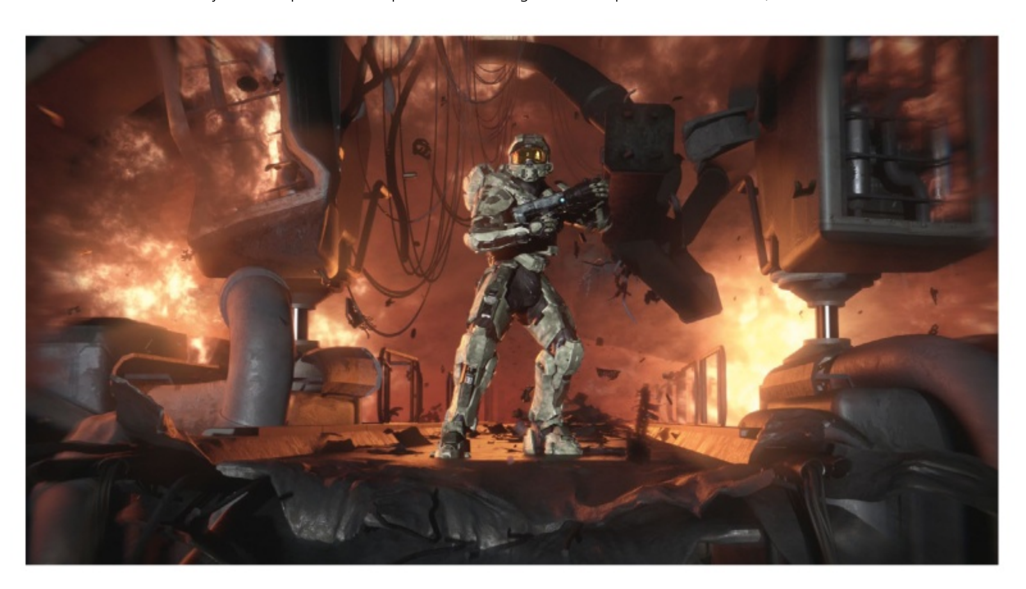
KILLER INSTINCT: SEASON 2

Publisher Microsoft **Developer** Iron Galaxy
Format Xbox One **Release** Autumn 2014

Killer Instinct layered systems atop systems to build a newcomer-friendly fighting game with enough depth for players to grow. Its weakness has been the gradual expansion of the roster, which has made it difficult for players to settle on any one fighter as their main and also cheapened any tournament victory. Yes, you won, but would you have won a week later against your competitor's new Fulgore? New developer Iron Galaxy will move the goalposts again for the start of the game's second season of new characters, systems and modes. TJ Combo leads the lineup and, with a placeholder Ultra Combo, is visibly incomplete; Iron Galaxy admitted it had only been working on the character for six weeks. *Season 2* is months away yet, but already threatens to include all the problems of the first, and some new ones besides.



Like *Halo 2*, *Halo 4* (right) was throttled by the hardware on which it launched. Bungie and 343's ambition stretched Xbox and Xbox 360 to breaking point, forcing slimmer stages and more linear pathways



HALO: THE MASTER CHIEF COLLECTION

Publisher Microsoft **Developer** 343 Industries, Certain Affinity, Saber Interactive **Format** Xbox One **Release** November 11

In the absence of a *Halo* sequel to sell Xbox Ones in 2014, 343 has teamed with Certain Affinity and Saber Interactive to bring every piece of *Halo*'s main story so far to the console. *The Master Chief Collection* isn't nearly as cynical as it could be, either. Each of the four *Halo* games on the disc will run at 1080p and 60fps, while *Halo 2* has been given a modern makeover just like *Halo: Combat Evolved Anniversary*.

Unlike *Anniversary*, *The Master Chief Collection* retains the multiplayer modes for *Combat Evolved* and every other *Halo*, all running through a unified interface with an optional unified control scheme. It adds up to 106 maps in total, most from the classic console games and PC ports, but with six reimagined *Halo 2* maps from the game's original multiplayer designer. Jump online for some Team Slayer, and the hoppers might place you in *Halo 1*'s Blood Gulch in one round and *Halo 3*'s Valhalla in the next, forcing deep knowledge of Halo's systems.

Yet *The Master Chief Collection*'s most potent weapon will be deployed two months after its release. In December, it will be home to the *Halo 5* multiplayer beta, long before the full game's 2015 launch. You could argue it's all just a paid demo built to sell you four games you've played already. But when 343 is going to such lengths to avoid cynicism, why grumble?

ORI AND THE BLIND FOREST

Publisher Microsoft **Developer** Moon Studios **Format** PC, Xbox One **Release** Autumn

Even after playing for just half an hour, there's a sense of intrigue to Moon Studios' *Ori And The Blind Forest*. The story is served in brief snippets, told by the forest's ghosts as you explore its shadowy glades. All that's clear is that the forest is not what it once was, that the spirits who once called it home have departed, and that its new inhabitants are malevolent.

"*Ori* is a Metroidvania game," says director **Thomas Mahler**. "We created the game because we grew up on games like *Link To The Past* and *Super Metroid*, and people always ask why nobody makes games like that any more, so we made one. I was afraid of people seeing it at the conference and thinking it's just another arty game, but there's so much more to it than what we showed on stage."

Ori, Mahler says, is a coming-of-age story. Players guide the little cat-like Ori deep into the woods, unlocking new abilities as they explore and thus opening up new areas in the classic Metroidvania fashion. Here, though, combat is a secondary concern, handled by the floating orb which acts as both your guide and weapon, striking at anything nearby while Ori evades the incoming threats and providing a helping hand with tutorial advice and story exposition. Ori moves with a speed and fluidity that has more in common with *Super Meat Boy* than Samus Aran, and guiding the little sprite around the game's ethereal world is a tactile delight.

"We wanted to do two things," Mahler says. "First, we wanted to make the platforming perfect. That's why you don't actually have to aim at enemies; we're more focused on the pixel-perfect platforming. Second, we wanted to tell a story. In a 2D platformer a deep, involving, emotional story is almost the last thing you think of, but we think we can give these characters very human issues with very human problems that people can actually connect to."

In the short demo, which is torn from the game's early stages, *Ori* immediately confronts players with some treacherous platforming challenges – careful wall-jumping is necessary to navigate a spiked path, for instance, while a sliding block must be pushed uphill past whirling barbs to clear an otherwise impassable gap.

A generous save system lets players drop a restart point before any particularly devious piece of platforming torture, but saves are a finite resource until the right upgrade has been unlocked. Mahler mentions *Super Meat Boy* time and again, and the save system threatens a degree of platforming challenge in the endgame that will demand the immediacy of an instant restart point in order to alleviate player frustration.

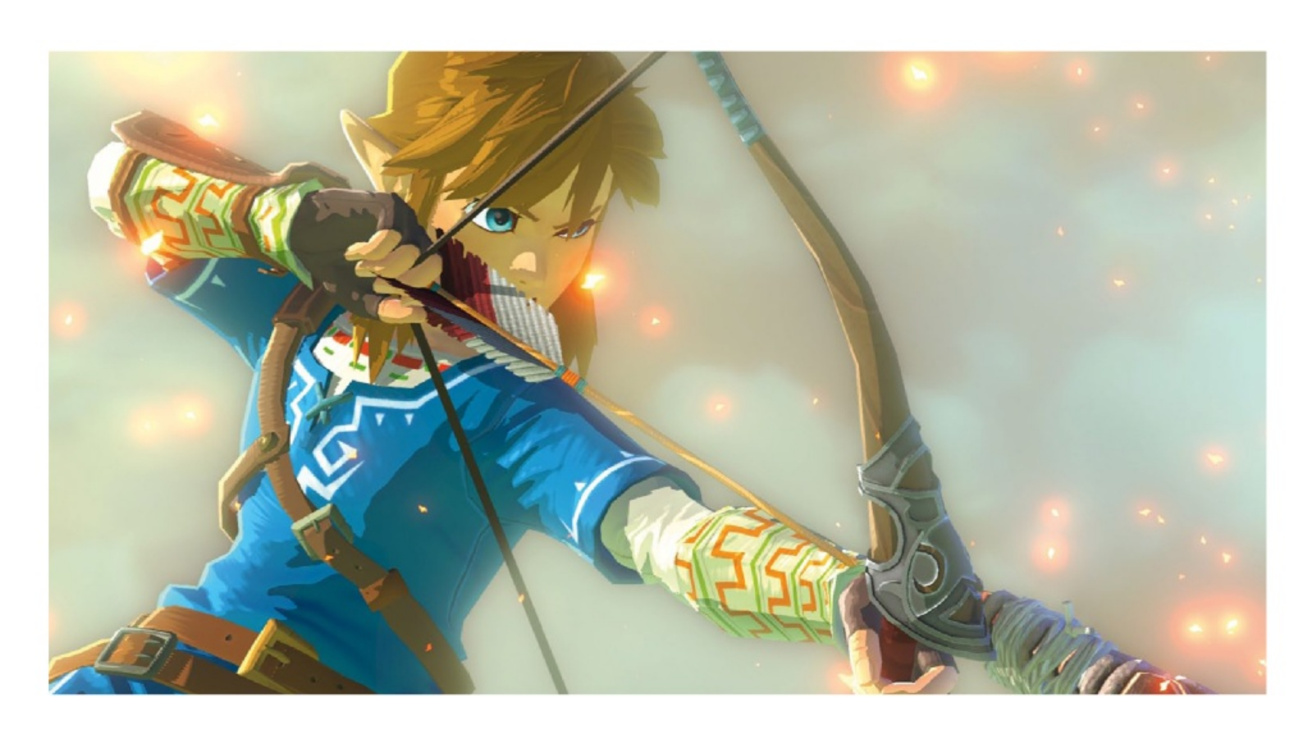
"All of it has to work perfectly," Mahler says. "That's why we've been in development for over four years. We don't accept anything that isn't polished. When people finish this game, I want them to be breathless. The best films make you think, 'Oh my god, that was amazing,' and we want to give people that feeling in a videogame, absolutely."



***Ori*'s spaces are colour-coded much like those of *Super Metroid*, giving players a helping hand on mentally mapping the sprawling 2D world**

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA

Publisher/developer Nintendo **Format** Wii U **Release** 2015



Nintendo's new approach to E3 was a success. Yet when the empty screen behind producer **Eiji Aonuma** was filled with a verdant Hyrule field full of swaying foliage, a distant mountain range and, just left of centre, a green figure on horseback, Nintendo showed it still knows how to capitalise on traditional imagery.

In short, the new *Zelda* looks astounding, even by Nintendo's remarkable recent standard on Wii U. And, according to Aonuma, the footage shown during Nintendo's E3 Direct broadcast wasn't, like so much of this E3's new announcements, pre-rendered, but in-game.

That footage was all too brief, and speculation was rife. One popular theory was that this wasn't Link, the ponytail, the earrings and the end-of-trailer Light arrow suggesting this game's protagonist would be Zelda rather than the boy who has spent almost 30 years rescuing her from evil. Aonuma, enigmatic as ever, danced around the subject at first, but has since confirmed that it is in fact Link in the trailer. He's also spoken of a new approach to tutorials, recognising how many players were put off *Skyward Sword*'s slow start.

Since *A Link To The Past*, main entries in the *Zelda* series have been set in large worlds that have had to be tackled in largely linear order, something Aonuma sought to alter in last year's more freeform 3DS outing *A Link Between Worlds*. This game will be set in an entirely open world, and while the prospect of *Zelda* crossed with *Skyrim* is irresistible, it also poses many challenges that Nintendo has never faced before.

The most fundamental concern is structural. An open world whose dungeons can be tackled in any order directly contradicts the series' gear-gated design – where the Hookshot found in one dungeon opens the path to the next – and *A Link Between Worlds*' item rental wasn't an entirely satisfactory solution to the problem. If gear is no longer to be the principal way in which the player is made to feel more powerful as the game progresses, will this be the first *Zelda* with a levelling system and a skill tree? And will enemy strength be static, or scale with the player's abilities?

Crucially, these are problems that others have faced before. Nintendo is more accustomed to inventing and solving its own at the outset, and letting others follow. Its best Wii U games have seen it updating and refining its own ideas: here, it will be expected to raise the bar for everyone. Suddenly, 2015 feels like a lifetime away.

The hero's use of a bow helped to drive speculation that it wasn't Link we were looking at. Series chief Eiji Aonuma seems set on toying with *Zelda* conventions



In presenting the game, Aonuma trotted out E3 2014's biggest cliché: "You can even reach those mountains in the distance if you walk far enough"

SPLATOON

Publisher/developer Nintendo (EAD) **Format** Wii U **Release** Q1 2015



It's no traditional shooter, but there's as much value in sticking together here as in the likes of *Battlefield*. When you die, you can super-jump straight from your base to a teammate

Splatoon is what occurs when Nintendo belatedly decides to move in on the most popular, lucrative and rigidly templated genre in games. *Splatoon* is the online multiplayer shooter redrawn on *De Blob*'s canvas using *Super Mario Sunshine*'s FLUDD; it's a game about painting the town first and targets second. There are no perks, no unlocks, no killstreaks and no sniper rifles – just eight players with a Super Soaker each and a tank of paint.

It's a typical sidestep of genre conventions by a company that prefers to define them. There is little to *Splatoon* that's traditional, and it takes some getting used to. The right analogue stick, for instance, can only pan the camera left and right, with the gyroscope used to aim. You jump with X, whose contemporaries *Call Of Duty* players have spent the best part of a decade stabbing to switch weapons. And it's not the opposition you'll want to line up in your sights, but the space around them. Victory is not about kills or captures, but painting more of the map than the opposition. It's easy to get distracted: when a Nintendo staffer reminds us that only paint on the ground counts, we're too busy turning a tree pink to care.

You'll want to paint the walls, too. A squeeze of the left trigger transforms you into a squid, plunging you beneath the painted surface, where you're hidden from enemy forces. You move faster, and all the while you're refilling your stock of paint. When a foe appears at the end of a corridor you can take them on, but you're better off dipping below the surface and popping up behind them.

The single map shown at E3 centres on a square chokepoint with raised platforms, and it's no surprise to see games descend into hectic running-and-gunning in the town square at first. Then you remember what you're here for, and head off to the side where you'll find a gated corridor, a flanking route to the enemy spawn point. Still thinking traditionally, we try to jump and mantle over it. We press a nonexistent action button to see if it'll open. Eventually, the penny drops. We squirt paint through the gate and onto the floor behind, transform into a squid, and pass through to the other side. Victory beckons.

Splatoon is both resoundingly familiar and thoroughly different, a quintessential Nintendo game, but the last thing that anyone expected. Shareholders are forever suggesting Nintendo move into more lucrative genres and onto rival platforms, and while the latter still seems fanciful, it's clear the company is listening. It's just going to do things its way.



Bayonetta spent the first game fighting angels, summoning demons to kill bosses. She'll also venture to Inferno this time to save Jeanne from a summon gone awry

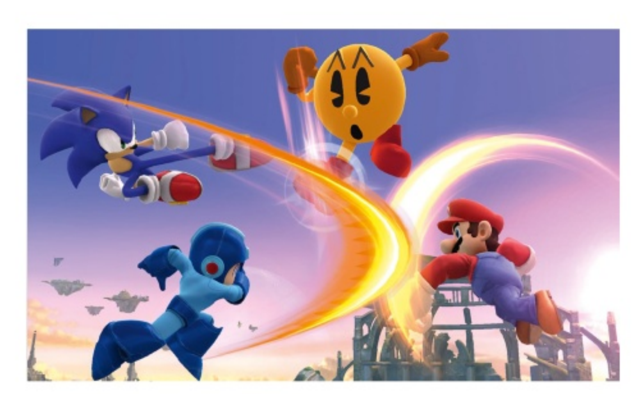
BAYONETTA 2

Publisher Nintendo **Developer** Platinum Games **Format** Wii U **Release** September 20 (JP), October (EU, NA)

Bayonetta 2 isn't your typical Nintendo-published project, and the Kyoto company's influence on the Umbran Witch has been equally unpredictable. Perhaps the most pleasant surprise is bundling the original with the sequel, which will be given away on a disc in Japan and via eShop in the west. It's a smart move – attractive to anyone whose 360 or PS3 has been consigned to the attic, and giving series newcomers a chance to catch up.

There are additional enticements to retread old ground: three typically *Bayonetta* reweavings of Nintendo costumes. In Link's garb, Bayonetta wields the Master Sword, collects rupees instead of halos, and unlocks doors with a *Zelda* jingle. In Samus Aran's suit, she wields an arm cannon and, in a charming addition, can raise or lower her visor at any time. And while wearing Princess Peach's dress, she collects coins and summons Bowser for Wicked Weave attacks.

As for the sequel, it may have been the bloodiest game at Nintendo's booth, but it was also the prettiest, running at an effortless 60fps. Tag Climax, a twoplayer online co-op mode, only increases the carnage, with many character options teased, including Jeanne. While the slip from its summer release is disappointing, Nintendo obviously considers *Bayonetta 2* a prize asset. October can't come soon enough.



SUPER SMASH BROS WII U/3DS

Publisher/developer Nintendo
Format 3DS, Wii U **Release** October 3 (3DS), winter (Wii U)

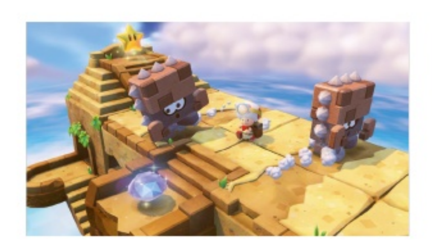
Nintendo's crossover juggernaut has been answering 'Who would win in a fight?' questions for 15 years, and that's the problem: who's left to add to its roster? With new IP so rare, Nintendo's down to back catalogue strip mining (hello, Greninja, Rosalina, Little Mac, Palutena, Wii Fit Trainer and the *Animal Crossing* Villager) and threadbare '80s icons (Mega Man, Pac-Man). Nintendo's big E3 reveal was you, or rather Miis, the trailer highlighting the chance to punch out Iwata and co. Customisation is more promising: equipable items will boost one attribute at the expense of another, while every fighter has a choice of 12 or more special attacks. We're concerned by Amiibo integration, but still optimistic for even an iterative Wii U update. *Smash* on 3DS, however, has a lot to do before October to make a case for a party brawler on such a tiny screen.



MARIO MAKER

Publisher/developer Nintendo
Format Wii U **Release** 2015

Nintendo's plumber has dabbled in user-generated content before with *Mario Paint*, but players have never been able to try bettering Shigeru Miyamoto's efforts. Indeed, *Mario Maker*, which allows you to build your own *Mario* levels, was conceived as a tool for internal development teams before being pitched as a game in its own right. Currently, you can choose between 8bit NES and *New Super Mario Bros* styles, placing blocks with the GamePad touchscreen and switching instantly between and editor and play modes. Brilliantly, once you complete a stage and switch back to the editor, your path through the course will be represented by a stream of translucent Marios, allowing you to tune your world-beating (or broken) design. But while the company is making positive noises regarding sharing your creations, nothing has been confirmed as yet.



CAPTAIN TOAD: TREASURE TRACKER

Publisher/developer Nintendo
Format Wii U **Release** Q4

The Adventures Of Captain Toad always felt more like a playable demo dotted around *Super Mario 3D World*'s map than a mere sideshow, so *Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker*'s announcement was no shock. The meat of the game will take the same shape as before: spatial 3D puzzle arenas where perspective is everything, with right stick or gyro-controlled pans of the camera revealing new paths. Each stage has three hidden treasures to discover, however, and one of the E3 demo's three playable levels was an on-rails minecart ride in which you use the GamePad screen and gyroscope to fling turnips at enemies, POW blocks and treasures. In the third, Magma Mountain, Toad moves from cover to cover while under attack from a fire-spitting dragon. It's gently paced, gently taxing stuff, but whether its tricks can carry a whole game remains to be seen.





CODE NAME: STEAM

Publisher Nintendo **Developer** Intelligent Systems
Format 3DS **Release** 2015

There are few ways of endearing yourself to an exhausted press pack that has just found out that they're not seeing the rumoured new 3DS *Metroid*, but producer Hitoshi Yamagami just about did by apologising for not being Shigeru Miyamoto. When the laughter subsided, he revealed *Code Name: STEAM*, a blend of *Valkyria Chronicles* and *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*. Part turn-based strategy, part thirdperson shooter, *Code Name: STEAM* puts you in control of a four-man squad drawn from a tactical force set up by Abraham Lincoln to counter an alien invasion in a cyberpunk Victorian London. STEAM stands for Strike Team Eliminating the Alien Menace; creative director **Paul Patrashcu** took a leaf out of Yamagami's book and apologised. "The sound you're hearing," he said, "is the English language buckling under the weight of that pun."



YOSHI'S WOOLLY WORLD

Publisher Nintendo **Developer** Good-Feel
Format Wii U **Release** 2015

Yoshi is hardly the only Nintendo character to find a formula and stick to it, but few of his stablemates seem quite so tied to the past. A great deal of what *Yoshi's Woolly World* has to set it apart is HD resolution and an art style borrowed from *Kirby's Epic Yarn*. The world and every object within it are made of wool, and Yoshi now turns eaten enemies into balls of yarn instead of eggs. There are similarly modest additions to the gameplay: Yoshi can use his tongue to tug on loose threads to reveal secret areas, has an unlimited flutter jump, co-op play is confirmed, and new chick projectiles can be thrown to create short-lived cloudy platforms. Our solo demo was very conservative, however, and we encountered some frustrating design too: at one point, our progress was blocked until we'd revealed a hidden mystery cloud by jumping in front of it.

Those who can't wait for Fox McCloud's full return can play as him in *Super Smash Bros* for Wii U and 3DS. Sadly, there's no room for Slippy Toad, a contender for gaming's most punchable sidekick



STAR FOX

Publisher/developer Nintendo **Format** Wii U **Release** 2015

One of Shigeru Miyamoto's three Wii U experiments, *Star Fox* was only shown behind closed doors at E3. Little wonder: this, to put it politely, isn't yet ready to take centre stage. Miyamoto says he has little interest in keeping pace with those chasing photorealism, and is instead determined to use the GamePad to power new ways to play. Or new ways to play old games.

On the big screen is a traditional *Star Fox* game, viewed from behind your Arwing, with the GamePad's left stick controlling its flight path. The GamePad, however, presents a cockpit view and a reticle that's aimed with the controller's gyroscope. It does away with the age-old *Star Fox* problem of the ship and its gunfire being bound to the same path, though it's nothing a twin-stick control scheme couldn't do.

The demo features free flight like *Star Fox 64*'s boss battles, although the final game will also have on-rails levels. The Arwing can transform into the Landmaster tank at the press of a button, and a new vehicle was also shown: a sort of helicopter that can drop a robot onto the ground that is then controlled in firstperson on the GamePad.

Showing a game that's still in the prototype stage is very unlike Nintendo, but so is seeking a development partner in order to ensure the game will be released in 2015.

HYRULE WARRIORS

Publisher Nintendo **Developer** Omega Force, Team Ninja, Nintendo SPD **Format** Wii U **Release**

Of all the results of Nintendo's new relaxed approach to licensing – the Mario character Happy Meal toys, the *Mario Kart 8* Mercedes DLC, the Google Maps *Pokémon* ARG – *Hyrule Warriors* remains the weirdest to date. It's certainly the hardest to understand: why would Nintendo let some of its most precious and well-known characters star in a series that has birthed nearly 30 games in the past five years alone?

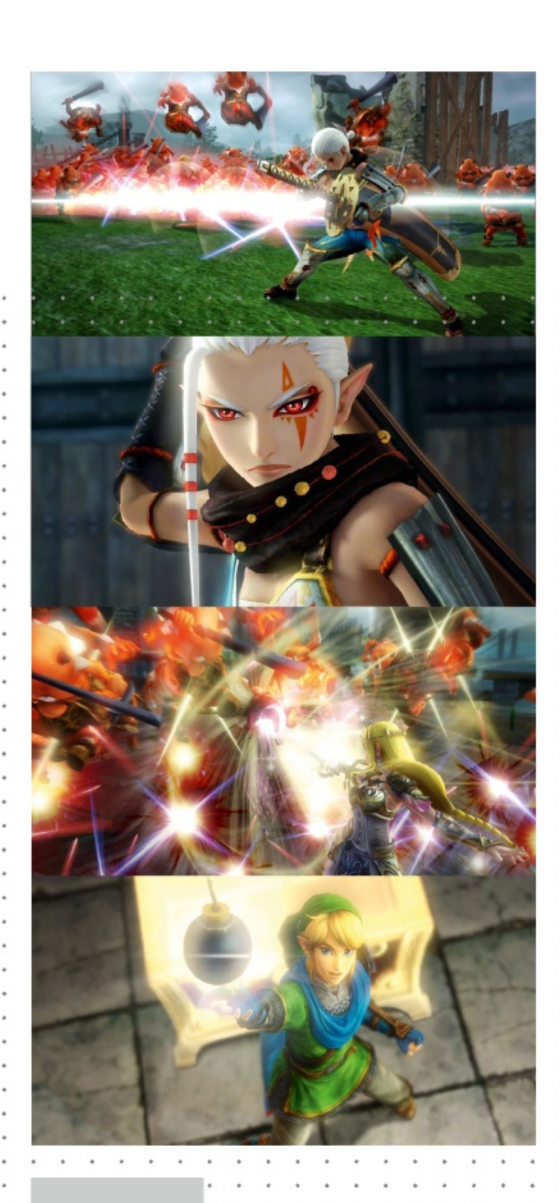
It's a question to which there are several answers. It helps fill a slot in the release schedule while Eiji Aonuma and co work on the open-world *Legend Of Zelda* that numbered among the most eye-catching announcements of E3 2014. It is made by a reliable external development team in a short, and inexpensive, period of time. Above all, it's because *Musou* games – as the series that encompasses *Dynasty Warriors* and *Samurai Warriors* is known in its homeland of Japan – are just plain good fun.

This is a *Musou* game first and a *Zelda* game second, which means that many of the latter's conventions have been cast aside. This is no tale of the young boy made into a hero by mystic fate and a lengthy quest: Link, or whichever of the other playable characters you choose, is a powerful warrior from the get-go. It's something that's made enormously clear when your first combo propels a dozen enemies onto their backsides.

Combat is uncomplicated, stress-free and spectacular, with screens full of enemies waiting to be caught up in lengthy two-button combos or standing idly by as you head off towards a distant objective. Levels are plucked from throughout the *Zelda* universe – our demo takes place in the lush green grounds of Hyrule Castle, for instance – and are sprawling affairs. A screen-corner minimap proves invaluable in guiding you towards the next friendly guard in need of a helping blade, bomb or light arrow.

Hyrule Warriors is a love letter to the *Zelda* games that recasts its characters as impossibly powerful superheroes. Many of Link's mechanical trappings have been left with Aonuma and team, but when they do appear they're as fantastical as the rest of the game. Link doesn't throw one bomb, but a flurry of them, each as large as he is. A powered-up version covered in glowing symbols almost fills the screen.

It's not afraid to play to convention – a Dodongo boss is, naturally, dispatched with a shower of bombs to the gullet – but it's what *Hyrule Warriors* does differently that delights, and it's in its cast that the game most radically diverts from Nintendo's well-trodden path. Link sits front and centre in the boxart, of course, but seeing Impa, Midna and Zelda lead the roster of playable characters announced so far is welcome, especially in the context of this E3. There were few more refreshing sights on the show floor than Zelda, one of gaming's longest-serving damsels in distress, knocking two dozen enemies into the sky with her glowing rapier blade.



There's no word on how many characters will feature, but *Dynasty Warriors 8*'s 80-plus fighters seems unlikely

ASSASSIN'S CREED: UNITY

Publisher/developer Ubisoft (Montreal) **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** October 28



Assassin's Creed is going back to its roots. After the series emphasised the horizontal in *Assassin's Creed*s *III* and *IV*, it's returning to the cramped alleyways, packed town squares and, crucially, vertiginous climbs of the early games, which always felt a better fit for its mix of freerunning and social stealth than the two-storey buildings of the 18th-century United States or *Black Flag*'s Caribbean waterways. Those games were certainly vast, but they weren't very *high*. *Unity*'s vision of Revolution-era Paris is both. It's three times the size of *Black Flag*'s dry landmass put together, while Notre Dame, which towers over the landscape here, is four times the size of *Brotherhood*'s Roman Colosseum.

The most striking statistic of all, however, is in evidence when new protagonist Arno Dorian looks down on a throng of Parisians assembled to witness an execution. There are more than 5,000 people down there, and many of them are AI-driven. The benefits of making an engine exclusively for powerful new hardware are plain to see.

The engine has been put to fine mechanical use, too, with vastly improved stealth and combat systems, the former a stance activated with a button press and the latter doing away with the way opponents in previous games attacked one at a time. After six games in as many years, freerunning is also being overhauled: the right trigger and the A button still sends you clambering upwards, but now RT and B will send Dorian spiralling gracefully down to terra firma. Haystacks will still feature, but as hiding places; their improbable role in softening the impact of a 400-foot swan dive are gone for good.

The headline addition is a set of fourplayer co-op missions, even if Ubisoft's decision to make all four avatars male led to a news cycle it hadn't foreseen. The co-op gameplay shown so far has seemed rather scripted, but such is the nature of the E3 demo, and Ubisoft promises a more dynamic approach to its quest design. Lose track of your target in a chase, for example, and you won't fail the mission, but will have to hunt them out again instead.

***Assassin's Creed: Unity* is further evidence Ubisoft is committed to backing new-generation consoles with new-generation games. This year's PS3 and 360 *Assassin's Creed* title is being built by another Ubisoft team**

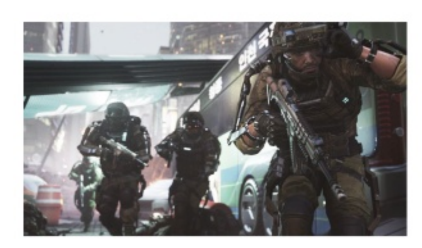
There are concerns, most of which can be traced to Ubisoft's kitchen-sink approach to open worlds. The words 'added to quest log' provoke a special sort of terror, and Dorian landing on a rooftop to a barrage of icons showing the morass of ground-level distractions suggests Ubisoft is in no mood to change. We'll find out soon, since *Unity* is that rarest of E3 2014 breeds: a new-gen-only game out this year.



Picking up where *Watch Dogs* left off, *Unity* demonstrates a new commitment to stealth and navigation in indoor spaces, as well as the traditional outdoor ones







NO MAN'S SKY

Publisher/developer Hello Games
Format PC, PS4 **Release** TBC

Despite the past two gameplay demos featuring them, Hello Games wants to reassure you that *No Man's Sky*'s colossal, procedurally generated universe isn't populated solely with alien dinosaurs. In fact, life in this particular cosmos should be incredibly varied. Hello Games' powerful tools allow its artists to build an archetype of, say, a plant or creature that the engine then riffs on endlessly. In theory, even in forests that contain only a single species of tree, you'll never seen the same plant twice. It's an intoxicating prospect that extends to the game's ships, which come in fighter, scientific exploration and freighter flavours, and are built from modular components. Wander too far from your craft and run out of oxygen or get trodden on, and you'll spawn back right next to it, minus any resources that you'd gathered.

THE CREW

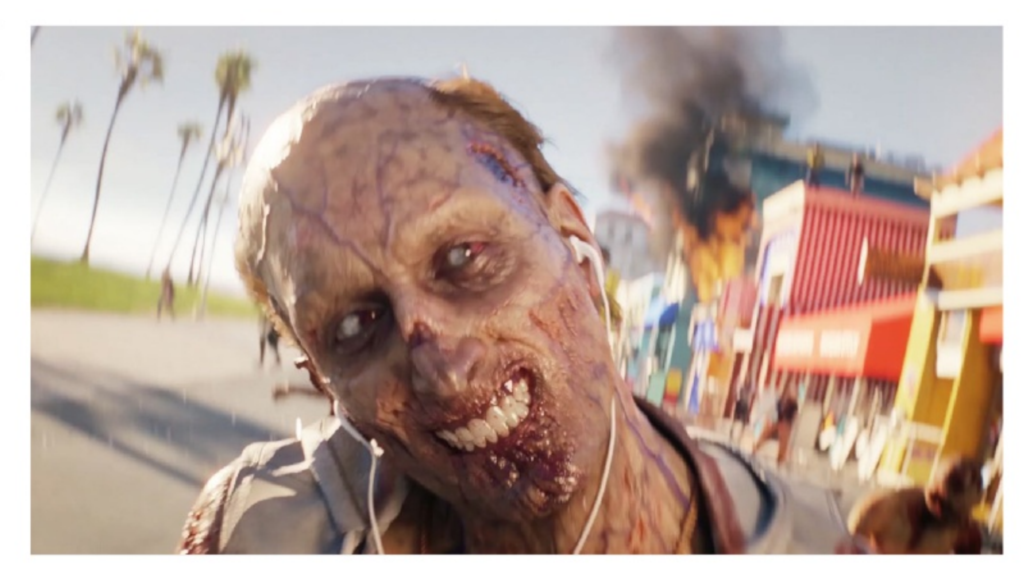
Publisher/developer Ubisoft (Ivory Tower, Reflections)
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** November 11

The Crew is enormous, ambitious and makes other racers seem decidedly old-fashioned. It can't match *Forza Horizon 2* for its beauty or physics, or *Driveclub* for track design, but how many games can match *The Crew* for scale? This virtual America is colossal, encompassing Aspen peaks, New York streets and Miami boulevards. *The Crew* was one of the few PS4/Xbox One-generation games made playable at 2013's E3, and a year has been kind. The past 12 months have seen Ubisoft's teams model all sorts of racing surfaces, from desert gravel to mountain-peak snow, and pack the world with hundreds of missions and secrets. Demoed in isolation, every piece of *The Crew*'s open-world puzzle works, but the real test will come when the servers go live on November 11 and all those pieces collide in a world millions can share.

CALL OF DUTY: ADVANCED WARFARE

Publisher Activision **Developer** Sledgehammer (High Moon)
Format 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One **Release** November 4

Advanced Warfare's new Biolab level was a perfect, and perfectly predictable, showcase for the E3 show floor, loaded with improbable *COD* moments and chances for Sledgehammer to show off its engine. Following a helicopter crash, protagonist Mitchell and company flee into a forest and use their EXO suits' cloaking systems to evade enemies en route to a lab camouflaged beneath a holographic tree canopy, which is only revealed to be an illusion as the team abseil into the lab's compound. Here, an intense indoor shootout culminates in a firefight with an armoured soldier and an escape via hovertank towards a clearing and helicopter pickup. Few games cram so much variety into one level and do all of it so well, but *Advanced Warfare* isn't competing against just any other games – it's competing against its past *Call Of Duty* brethren.



The trailer was all CGI, but behind closed doors Yager team showed off its work in Unreal Engine 4, revealing sun-drenched Californian vistas in a painterly style not unlike *Spec Ops*

DEAD ISLAND 2

Publisher Deep Silver **Developer** Yager **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** Spring 2015

Loved by some, detested by many, *Dead Island* was an unholy union of good ideas and janky execution. Developer Techland has since joined forces with Warner Bros to make *Dying Light*, leaving the rights to the series with Koch Media, and sequel development in the hands of *Spec Ops: The Line* creator Yager.

Built on Unreal 4, *Dead Island 2* is another chance for the team to flex its Unreal Engine skills, this time building an open-world California for four classes (Bezerker, Hunter, Bishop, and Speeder) to run amok in. Yager has kept all the elements that worked for *Dead Island* – the tropical setting, the melee weapons – but executed them with greater proficiency. Also greater is the arsenal, featuring hundreds of combination weapons, and the potential for clever mob interactions. Zombies are attracted to sounds, so setting off a car alarm can be used to turn the undead hordes on your human aggressors.

The online integration will ensure a steady stream of those; Yager pitched for the sequel after the original became an office LAN favourite, so perhaps it's no surprise that for *Dead Island 2,* multiplayer is on by default. Unless you opt out, you'll know there are up to seven others occupying your game, slaying zombies on their own time, completing their own objectives, and possibly going to homicidal lengths to survive.

THE DIVISION

Publisher/developer Ubisoft (Massive) **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2015



Massive is in a confident mood. When we bump into MD **David Polfeldt** at Ubisoft's E3 booth and say we're off to interview *The Division* game director **Ryan Barnard**, he smiles. "Ask him about graphical downgrades," he says, referencing the furore over the difference between the *Watch Dogs* announced two years ago and the one that shipped. So, will *The Division* end up matching the standard set by its announcement footage? "Setting a graphical bar for this generation has been one of the pillars of the game," Barnard says. "The new demo is that bar. It will actually get a little better than that. We're not creating fairytales: of course there's going to be speculation, but all we can do is take care of our own business. What you saw on stage is absolutely what we will hit graphically on all platforms we have for the game."

The behind-closed-doors demo seems designed to make that point. First, we have a second viewing of the Microsoft stage demo; then one of the dev team sits next to us on a sofa and returns to the same area at night. The two are indistinguishable. Resolution doesn't matter when there is so much else going on – global illumination, lit smoke, a Perspex information booth shattering under enemy gunfire. We see new factions – the Cleaners, with their hazmat suits and flamethrowers, destroying potentially valuable supplies in a contagion-zone convenience store – and gameplay systems, too. An echo formed from CCTV footage and smartphone data provides intel with an AR glimpse of the past. We see a skill tree that eschews a traditional class system and allows for abilities to be switched on the fly. Gear can be tweaked too: with a few button presses, a seeker mine is turned into a flashbang, and a recon drone modded to strobe and stun an enemy. We're shown the companion app, in which the tablet player controls a support drone. The team is debating whether or not enemies should be able to shoot it down, another design challenge in a game full of the things.

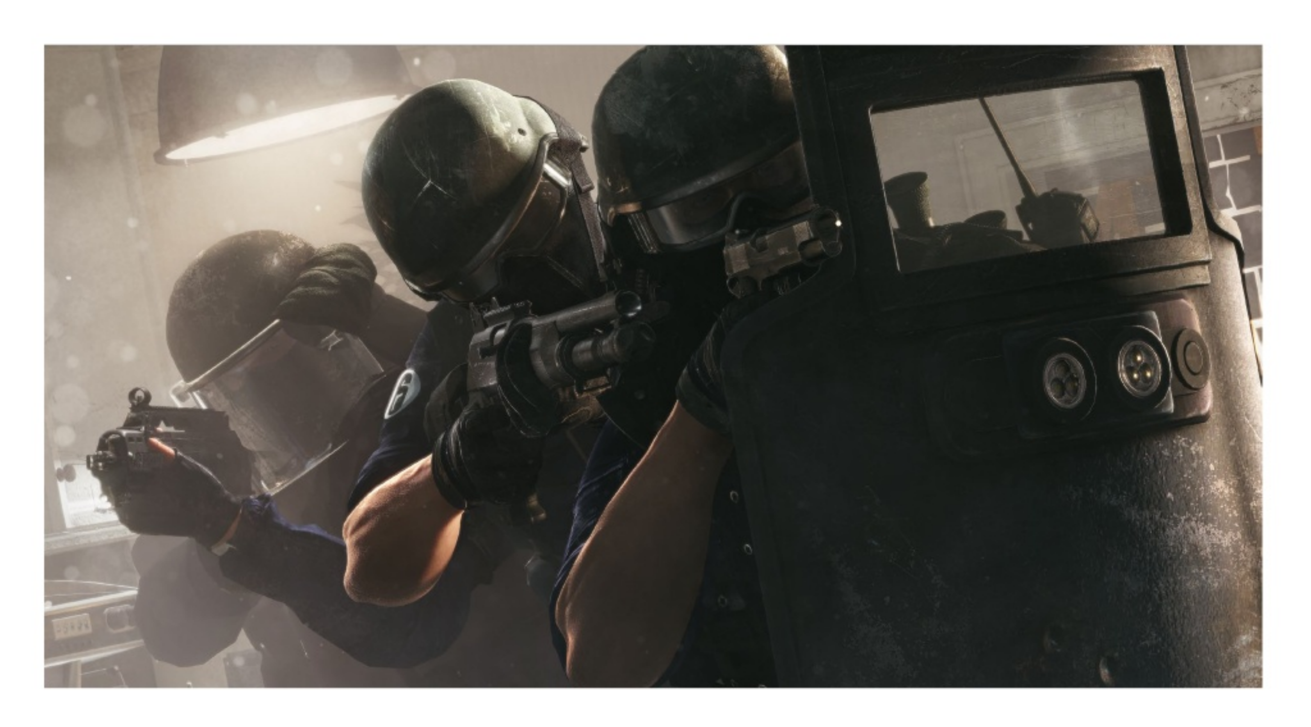
But it's the look of it that sticks in the mind. "I'm an eye-candy guy, a graphics whore, so it's important," Barnard says. "Of course we want the game to be beautiful, but it's about immersion. The less distracted I am by how something looks, because it looks real, the more immersed I am in the game. Games are about transporting you into a situation, and every element that pulls you out of it detracts from it."

There's little of that in *The Division*. Massive has the ambition and the tech to pull it off. On this evidence, the studio has every right to be bullish.

***Watch Dogs* has shaken players' faith in Ubisoft's trailers, but *The Division*'s new Snowdrop engine might surprise everyone**

RAINBOW SIX: SIEGE

Publisher/developer Ubisoft **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2015



The now-shelved *Rainbow Six: Patriots* teased an exploration of ethics and morality, but that has been replaced with something even more intriguing: choice and consequence in action. In *Siege*, Ubisoft has built the foundation for a brand-new generation of *Rainbow Six* games while staying true to the series' roots.

"We wanted to get back to what *Rainbow Six* was," AI director **Jerome Lasserre** says. "I think that's what people want. On the one side you have the defenders, and their role is to fortify the area and build a stronghold; on the other side you have the attackers who are basically experts in demolition, and their role is to get inside by any means necessary."

Both sides have gadgets to suit those roles. In the minute before each round starts, Rogue Spear's terrorists will barricade windows, fill corridors with barbed wire, barricade walls with steel panels and lay down portable cover, all in the name of securing their hostage. On the other side, Raven Shield's player-controlled drones will enter the building and scout the area, searching for the hostage and probing for weak spots.

When the round begins, the makeshift fortress becomes a shooting gallery where no solid object is safe. Raven Shield players can use breaching charges on any unfortified wall or floor to make their own routes. Rogue Spear defends, the team's carefully placed traps and surveillance devices giving them the jump on the invading forces.

Ubisoft Montreal's team has deconstructed *Assassin's Creed*'s Anvil engine to allow a level of destruction not seen since *Red Faction: Armageddon*. Powerful weapons can punch holes in any wall or tear a door from its hinges, and explosives can bring down walls or collapse ceilings.

"It was an awesome amount of work," Lasserre says. "We had, on one side, the whole destruction engine team working on the technology; and then on the other side we had the production pipeline building super-simple maps where walls were either 'on' or 'off' – and that let them tweak map design to make sure it played well. No fuss; only gameplay. Then we brought the two together, and that's what you played today."

The shield-bearing class is powerful in the tight corridors of a small suburban home, but in a house that can be shredded by gunfire it only takes a smart flanker to put a shot in his back through a wall

For now, only the multiplayer half of *Siege* has been shown, but the campaign will come later. Even so, Ubisoft's wall-breaching assault on the competitive FPS market that it left behind after *Rainbow Six: Vegas 2* was a show stealer. It's an exciting return to one spawn, friendly fire, and a focus on tactics rather than a quick trigger finger.



The hostage takes the role of flag in E3's simple CTF gametype, but she's a flag you might shoot or detonate, prompting care and attention when breaching the enemy's reinforced stronghold

FAR CRY 4

Publisher/developer Ubisoft (Montreal) **Format** 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One **Release** November 18



What you saw of *Far Cry 4* at Ubisoft's E3 press conference was its opening cinematic, which says a lot when you realise who's in charge. As creative director on *Assassin's Creed III*, it was **Alex Hutchinson**'s job to keep the terrible secret that you didn't get to play as the assassin on the box for six long hours.

Far Cry 4's opening seems to be a response to that. Within the space of a few minutes, players are informed that they're a foreigner in an unknown land, one where border guards are there to kill or be bribed, and one ruled by a murderous, pink-suited, peroxide-coiffed headcase. The scene has been effectively set. *Far Cry 3*'s marketing effort focused on the definition of insanity. This takes that concept to a more extreme, blackly comic level.

Your toolset has expanded accordingly. The E3 demo focused on an assault on an outpost, which could be carried out by stealth, from the air, by gyrocopter and wingsuit, or by smashing through the front gates on the back of an elephant. Naturally, we found the final option in that list irresistible. Your mount is a surprisingly nimble thing, too: a slow mover, admittedly, but with a reasonable turning circle, and a decent amount of health. And despite the fact we spent a fair chunk of *Far Cry 3* skinning all manner of tropical wildlife for the sake of a brand new wallet or weapon holster – a mechanic Hutchinson confirms will return – we feel a stinging pang of guilt when our companion finally succumbs to the enemy threat and keels over.

A series-first co-op mode will offer further flexibility in approach, and hopefully save some elephants in the process, with one player covering from the sky while the other trumpets in through the outpost gate, perhaps. On PS3 and PS4, those with a PlayStation Plus subscription will be given ten invites which will allow friends who don't own the game to download it and join in.

It's the tone, not its approach to multiplayer, that will define *Far Cry 4*, though. *Far Cry 3* was at its best when it wasn't taking itself too seriously, and while players shouldn't expect a dubstep-soundtacked sequel full of burning weed fields, it's clear that Hutchinson is relishing being let off *Assassin's Creed*'s historical leash. "Maybe it's the fact I was coming from this very serious franchise and I just wanted to blow shit up," he says. "It was very liberating to say, 'Let's roll with this funny tone.' We still want it to be serious, but it's OK to laugh. Hopefully, it's an uncomfortable one."

Kyrat is a spectacular piece of world-building, made more remarkable by the number of formats it will have to support, and the brief time in which it's been created



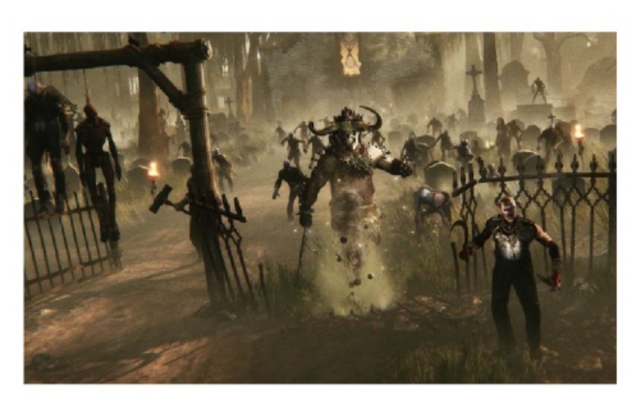
Playable at the show, ***Dreadnought*** **feels a bit like a supersized** ***World Of Tanks*****, made by a team more in love with Battlestar Galactica than the armour of WWII**

DREADNOUGHT

Publisher Grey Box **Developer** Yager **Format** PC **Release** TBC

The second of Yager's games to debut at E3, *Dreadnought* places players in command of their own capital ships. These vast behemoths are manned by crew who will level up alongside you, and you'll engage in five-on-five battles against enemy fleets low in planetary atmospheres where mountains and canyons become cover, and casualties will number in the thousands. It's a measured game of move and countermove as each ship grinds into position to fire colossal broadsides or launch tactical nukes. You can also reroute power to shields, engines or weapon systems; warp in and out of the battle to launch surprise strikes; or recover at the fringes.

It's a game Yager is planning to offer for free, without pay-to-win options for players with the biggest wallet. Instead, promises project lead **Peter Holzapfel**, players will be able to play for weeks and months without paying a penny, and will want to invest in the game they've grown to love. "We can't say how it will work yet," Holzapfel says, "but we came up with this idea for monetisation, and we weren't sure whether we'd dare push it that way, but we're doing it and we're going even further than we thought. With *Spec Ops*, we did something different with action games, and we want to be just as surprising with free-to-play games."



HUNT: HORRORS OF THE GILDED AGE

Publisher/developer Crytek (Austin)
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** Autumn 2014

Set in an 18th-century world where every urban legend is real, *Hunt* throws teams of four up against legendary monsters and legions of cultists and ghouls in thirdperson shootouts. No two matches should be the same, since random generation will create a fresh threat and new maps every time you play. In the same breath, Crytek calls it "cowboys versus monsters" and "Holmes versus Lovecraft". That sounds ludicrous, but indeed microtransaction costumes will allow players to dress as Sherlock Holmes or Clint Eastwood's Man With No Name. *Hunt*, as Crytek Austin has it, is a game the studio could box and sell but is instead giving away for free. Crytek's new triple-A free-to-play model meant a cultural shift at the former *Darksiders* developer, but a modest one. *Hunt* is as billed: a complete co-op RPG that just so happens to be free.



BATTLECRY

Publisher Bethesda Softworks **Developer** BattleCry Studios
Format PC **Release** TBC

Even Platinum Games couldn't make a multiplayer adversarial melee action game work, so it's alarming that BattleCry Studios should mimic *Anarchy Reigns* so closely for its first game. Even more surprising is that this free-to-play offering almost works. Like *Dishonored* and *Half-Life 2*, it's set in a world where old history is built atop even older history – a world without gunpowder, where scores are settled on battlefields in melee combat powered by a single attack, a secondary ability and three special powers per class. The simplicity of the combat system makes *BattleCry*'s matches more about where you fight than how you fight, but *Anarchy Reigns*' problem remains: every two-on-one fight is a forgone conclusion. A good shooter player can easily outgun two enemies, but when battles are fought with blades, you can only run or die.

METAL GEAR SOLID V: THE PHANTOM PAIN

Publisher Konami **Developer** Kojima Productions **Format** 360, PS3, PS4, Xbox One **Release** TBC



There's more than a little *Peace Walker* in *The Phantom Pain*. Years after the events of *Ground Zeroes*, Big Boss awakens to find his forearm missing and his island fortress sunk. On the battlefields of Afghanistan, he begins to recruit for an all-new Mother Base, with enrolling Kaz Miller an early objective. The first mission is an extraction job the ageing Boss takes on alone, and along the way vehicles, soldiers, weapons and livestock are his for the retrieving.

The new Mother Base is a real structure built from modular components to each player's own design, but is otherwise run and managed like *Peace Walker*'s old Mother Base. Each ocean-based platform takes on a role, catering for the growing number of soldiers, researching new hardware, housing secured vehicles and equipment, or providing intel and fire support on the battlefield. Troops taken from Soviet-occupied Afghanistan will be deprogrammed and turned to Big Boss's cause, saluting him as he walks around the deck and providing bonuses in the field. UAVs, anti-air guns and well-equipped gunners are all necessities for the new Mother Base, which can – and will – come under attack, and must be defended at all costs.

A shifting and dynamic weather system makes extraction of troops and equipment via the Fulton Recovery balloons more difficult at times, but any downed soldier or unmanned vehicle can be extracted if conditions are in your favour. Infiltration is best carried out at night, and Big Boss can take a pause with his cigar, watching as time passes and guards go about their patrols in high-speed time-lapse. Clouds cast dynamic shadows; soldiers work, change shifts and sleep; and the weather can quickly turn a sunny day into an impenetrable sandstorm: something Big Boss can use to his advantage with a quality weather forecaster back at base.

And new systems offer Big Boss more options as he sneaks around Russian bases. There are corner takedowns, an attention-grabbing crack of his mechanical wrist, and the classic cardboard box, which can now be left behind as a decoy.

While the beige deserts of Afghanistan and the orange towers of Mother Base were all Kojima's team demoed at E3, trailers and early screens hint at many more maps and even more diverse spaces to explore

The Phantom Pain is a game where child soldiers and explorations of war crimes clash with airborne sheep and a trusty horse that will occasionally pause for a comedy fart and a dump. It's thematically inconsistent the way a *Metal Gear* game should be, and characteristically Kojima through and through, with levity and absurdity sweetening the bitter thematic pills the game will ask players to swallow.



Players will build their own Mother Base from modular parts, making the inevitable mission where Big Boss has to sneak onto his own base even more delicious



THE EVIL WITHIN

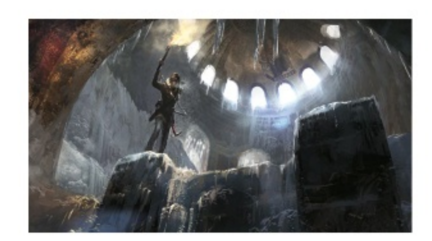
Publisher Bethesda **Developer** Tango **Format** 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One **Release** October 21 (US), 24 (UK)

Debussy's Clair De Lune is an effective remedy for stress as it is, but as the soundtrack for save rooms in *The Evil Within*, it delivers a whole new level of relief. You'll hear it in the distance at first, cutting through the tension as you approach and then enter these fleeting pools of safety. The dangers outside are many: the extended gameplay demo at E3 gave a glimpse of more enemies, including several immortal ones that force you to flee, and more gruesomely over-engineered traps. An eye symbol in the top right of the screen alerts to you to the fact you're being watched (or maybe even chased), but HUD aids like these can be removed if you'd prefer a stiffer challenge. If *Resident Evil* was a paean to schlock-horror movies, this is a modern callback to those games' first shambling steps and, more excitingly, creator Shinji Mikami's roots.

MIRROR'S EDGE

Publisher/developer EA (DICE) **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** TBC

A year on from the reveal of DICE's *Mirror's Edge* reboot and the studio's still not ready to show much of its game. What we have seen, however, is early prototype footage, which suggests that Faith's distinctive firstperson parkour and combat abilities are shaping up nicely. Faith has gained a few new abilities, such as grabbing poles to corner while wall-running, and her takedowns are as brutal as they are elegant. Of course, these were elements that DICE got pretty much spot on the first time round, its game instead let down by clunky storytelling, an archaic approach to boss fights and a lack of environmental variety. The development team promises to address all of these things in time, but right now all we have to go on is something that doesn't look all that far from our initial glimpse of the first game back in 2008.

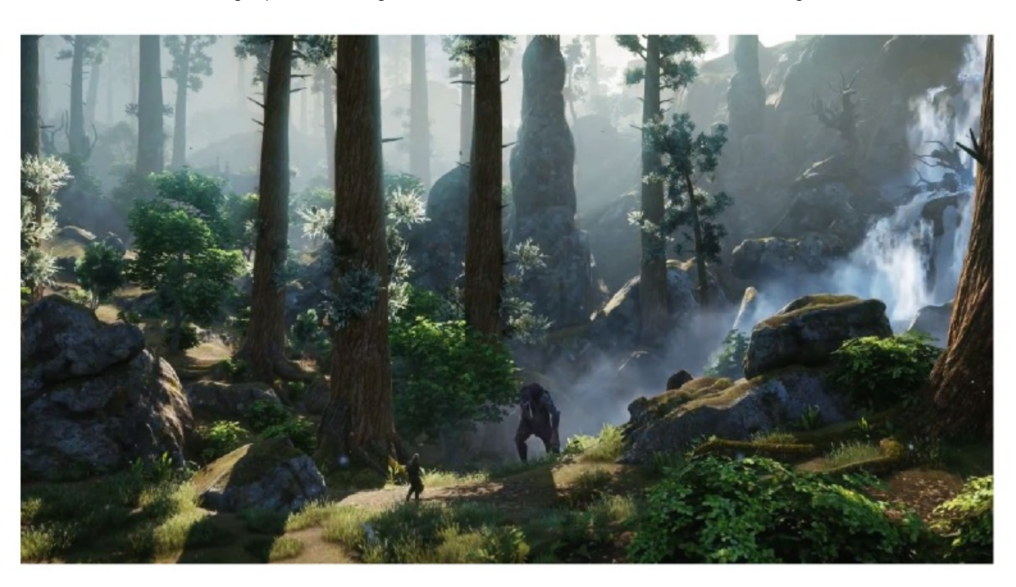


RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER

Publisher Square Enix **Developer** Crystal Dynamics **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2015

It might be clunky, but at least the title of the forthcoming sequel to last year's *Tomb Raider* reboot contains a little more truth: this time around, there will be proper tombs to raid. And, with a new technological baseline in Xbox One and PS4, Crystal Dynamics promises playable areas three times the size of those seen in the previous game, with greater detail and more extravagant set-pieces. There will be more travelling, too, since *Rise* will take players on a journey around the world rather than restricting the action to a single island, Croft using further adventures in an attempt to comes to terms with her ordeal. Hopefully, she'll meet a cast of less clichéd characters on the way. But along with bears, armed men and large drops, Croft will also have to face down Nathan Drake for the first time, since both games are due in 2015.

***Dragon Age: Inquisition* and *The Witcher III* are early tastes of the kind of high-fantasy worlds games can chart in the new console generation, and all this before Bethesda has even stepped up to the plate**



DRAGON AGE: INQUISITION

Publisher EA **Developer** BioWare **Format** 360, PS3, PS4, Xbox One **Release** October 7

There's more than a little common ground between *Dragon Age: Inquisition* and *The Witcher 3*. Each is powered by their own bespoke technology, and both render a forested fantasy world in extraordinary detail. *Inquisition*'s advantage is in its lore, which goes bigger on magic and fantasy spectacle. *The Witcher* gets the more spectacular vistas, but *Inquisition* gets boss fights against dragons that fill the entire screen.

And BioWare's polish comes in stark contrast to CD Projekt's rawness. In *Inquisition*'s systemic world, it's possible to hunt animals almost to extinction, converse in branching chats using the BioWare conversation wheel, and manage an army of followers, who can be included in your party or dispatched as agents in your ongoing mission to end the Mage/Templar war.

It comes to pass that the war is just a bump in the road on your way to closing a rift between worlds through which demons are spilling. The rift becomes both plot point and mechanic, making a neat way to spawn enemies for chaotic battles, which are as messy now as they were in *Origins*. The effects are prettier and the AI characters smarter, but without a time-halting tactical view, *Dragon Age*'s combat would be a dizzying blur of explosions and spells. The world is spectacular, but woe betide anyone wanting to explore it.

BATTLEFIELD: HARDLINE

Publisher/developer EA (Visceral, DICE) **Format** 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One **Release** October 24

Despite all the problems that the *Hardline* beta caused for Origin users, perhaps the biggest disconnect highlighted by the version of the game EA rolled out in the middle of its E3 conference is that real-world players don't play quite as the designers at Visceral might like them to. *Hardline* wants to be a coordinated assault and well-timed escapes – albeit as seen through Michael Bay's viewfinder – with thieves on the ground stealing millions while their backs are covered by snipers who zipline from rooftop to rooftop, and then extracted by professional wheelmen before the cops can shut their operation down. In reality, *Hardline* is pure chaos. It's every man for himself in a world collapsing around your ears and everyone running in different directions.

A heist game on a grander scale than *Payday*, *Hardline*'s fantasy is only spoiled by that inflation. While DICE's recent *Battlefield*s have tried to carefully guide players' behaviour towards something that benefits the whole team, the first *Battlefield* by Visceral offers less incentive to work as a unit and an even larger strategic toolbox.

Over time, players will find their roles and learn the tricks behind a successful heist, but *Hardline*'s design choices still break the fantasy. *Payday*'s small-squad battles were movie heists made playable, but *Hardline*'s 64-player war between cops and robbers are spectacles of such lunacy as to defy credibility, even in a game where players have a history of wing-walking and opening parachutes metres from the ground. Call it ludo-narrative dissonance or call it silliness, but *Hardline* can look ridiculous in action without the guiding hands of 32 EA thieves undertaking a planned robbery and 32 EA cops executing a rehearsed containment strategy.

Still, the theme is refreshingly different, even if the game doesn't play exactly as intended. Visceral's strength and DICE's weakness, after all, has always been in singleplayer campaigns, and cops and robbers makes for a fresher path to follow than yet another globe-trotting military escapade. Visceral promises *Far Cry*-style stealth and wildly theatrical heists, where the scripted NPCs will behave exactly as intended without pesky real people messing it all up.

Players will get to experience life on both sides of the law: taking down criminals, and going undercover with a gang of career bank robbers en route to the biggest heist of their lives. It's testament to EA's willingness to try something new, and it's possible that *Rainbow Six: Siege* and *Hardline* are the beginning of a new trend. As modern military warfare falls out of fashion, the industry is turning towards science fiction as a saviour, and *Titanfall* and *Destiny* are evidence that players are willing to embrace the fantastic once again. But *Hardline* and *Rainbow: Six Siege* are proof there's still room in the 21st century for charged gunplay and the SWAT fantasy, even a decade after *SWAT 4* and *Rainbow Six 3: Black Arrow*.



Ziplines are a game-changer, but the real shift might be map size, which in the beta build feels more *COD* than *BF* in scale

DESTINY

Publisher Activision **Developer** Bungie **Format** 360, PS3, PS4, Xbox One **Release** September 9



The servers were running long before Bungie made *Destiny*'s alpha public. Some time in mid-May, friends and family were playing in a small slice of *Destiny*'s world, and by early June the test had been expanded to special guests and press. For a time, you could trace the PSN handles of anyone you met to the Twitter accounts of developers up and down the West Coast, and the frequent interactions *Destiny* thrusts upon players were consistently cordial, apparently thanks to a certain class of player hunting on these early test servers.

The secret ended on June 13, when every PS4 owner could join in the surprise alpha, but something totally unexpected happened: the atmosphere remained cordial, the interactions stayed friendly and the players – suddenly numbering in the millions – were still delightful. In part, it's thanks to *Destiny*'s limited set of interactions, just a wave and a dance and a pointy finger, and it's also due to the sheer delight of the players to be sampling the game so early. Mostly, however, it's because Bungie has managed to build something that only gets better when people are around.

Alone, *Destiny* is good, but when other players stumble into your world on their way to their next quest or when they join you on yours, it becomes great. It has long been true that co-op with friends adds a lot to gaming, but that's rarely true of co-operative interactions with strangers, as any *Gears Of War* player will attest. Only a rare few do it well, such as *Dark Souls*, with its countless layers of abstraction.

Destiny also takes an abstract approach, allowing players to meet one another as you cross into others' games while making a journey of your own. Around every corner you find players fighting their own personal battles – sometimes they need help and sometimes they're happier alone, but coming across them is never boring. Their stories become tiny pieces of your own, and on occasion a furious firefight will lead to a bond of sorts, and an invite to form a fireteam will cement two strangers together for a few hours of adventure. For the first time in a long while, an online shooter has become a place to make friends, not enemies.

Bungie would dispute the description of *Destiny* as an always-online *Halo* in an open world, but that's how it feels in play, and that's what makes it one of this year's most exciting new games

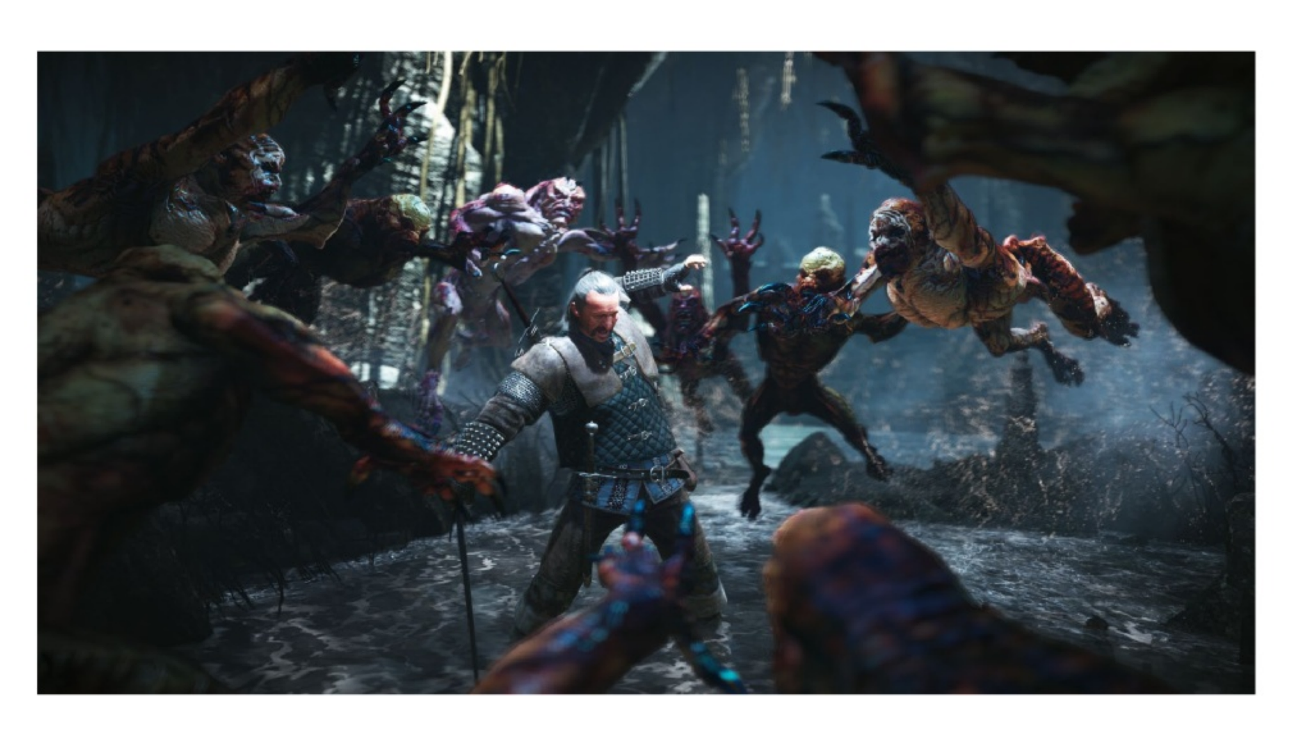
We played *Destiny* last year, long before there were enough players to provide the kind of experience Bungie is after, but one year on to the day we saw that promise fulfilled. The technology works, the world-building offers room to explore, the guns crack, and the players play nice. Call it respect, perhaps; *Destiny* demands it.



Destiny's armour design is elegant, albeit fairly nondescript. The game has a subdued vibe all round, which perhaps helps to explain why playing with strangers is so unlike the typical console FPS experience

THE WITCHER III: WILD HUNT

Publisher Bandai Namco **Developer** CD Projekt Red **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** February 24



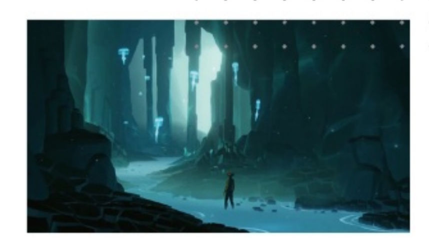
The *Witcher* series has always had woman trouble. In the first game, Geralt collected a card for each of his sexual conquests. *The Witcher 2*'s Triss was a CG centrefold in Polish Playboy, and teams at CD Projekt's Warsaw HQ work under giant wall-hung prints of that issue's cover. *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt* was E3's game of the show for many, but the same old problems remain. When Geralt Of Rivia rides on horseback into the bustling city of Novigrad, the first female voice we hear is that of a passerby. "You look sweaty. Fancy sweating on me?"

The ultimate objective of the lengthy quest that forms CD Projekt's behind-closed-doors demo is an ashen-haired girl who, we will find out in close-up later on, has a nice bottom. Along the way, we meet three mystical women whose faces are covered by burlap sacks and are called Crones. This is the most beautiful and ambitious game CD Projekt has made yet, but the studio is lucky that Ubisoft's show-floor gaffes hoovered up all the accusations of misogyny.

The game's problems extend beyond the thematic. This 40-minute demo contains what is presented as a single example of CD Projekt's new quest system but is in fact three traditional ones stitched end to end. After meeting an informant, we set out into swampland in search of a Godling – an endangered, boyish humanoid creature – who we're told may be able to help. After clearing out a settlement of bandits (its sole inhabitant a woman who coquettishly invites us back for some tea later on) we find that he can, but he's lost his voice, so we get it back by killing some harpies who are keeping it in a jar. He directs us to the Crones, who won't speak to us until we've collected a debt from the alderman of a nearby village. He, in turn, needs help: some local evil force has been picking off villagers. We assist – first killing a werewolf, then an evil spirit that has possessed a tree – then collect the debt, return to the Crones, marvel at their dreadful Welsh accents and, at last, find the girl. Life in the *Witcher III* is an endless procession of trade and barter in which all we have to offer is death and a willingness to travel.

More sex and stabbing than spells 'n' elves, *The Witcher* is a hardboiled take on high fantasy in the style of Conan The Barbarian, setting it apart from *Dragon Age*, despite their similarities when viewed from afar

Swordplay has, at least, been much improved. It's slow-paced, deliberate and fluidly animated, but Geralt's arsenal of spells are clearly more powerful than either his steel or silver blades. It's a fine-looking game, too, but nowhere near as fine as the new trailer shown at the demo's end suggests. A delay to February means there's still time to sort that out, but we suspect it's already too late for the women.



ABZU

Publisher 505 Games **Developer** Giant Squid
Format PS4 **Release** 2016

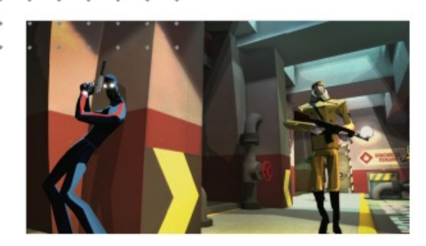
Art director Matt Nava and composer Austin Wintory last worked together on *Journey*, and now they've reunited for the debut game from Nava's new studio, Giant Squid. In *Abzu*, a lone humanoid descends into a vast, surreal ocean and finds it teeming with strange life. There is an underlying menace to the generally peaceful atmosphere, plus a focus on exploration and discovery.



BATMAN: ARKHAM KNIGHT

Publisher Warner Bros **Developer** Rocksteady
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2015

With the Arkham Knight bringing an army in tow, Rocksteady's E3 demo showed how the Batmobile can even the odds. In Battle mode, Bats' car packs a Gatling gun, can strafe, and fires explosive blasts to rip open drone tanks. For human enemies, it's armed with stun rounds and will be summonable for on-foot combat takedowns. But it's more than a weapon, with puzzles built around the vehicle too.



COUNTERSPY

Publisher/developer Dynamighty
Format Android, iOS, PS3, PS4, Vita **Release** Summer

Made by a small team with the likes of Pixar and LucasArts on their CVs, *Counterspy* is, at first glance, a 2D sidescrolling stealth game. When you hunker behind cover, however, the perspective shifts to that of a thirdperson shooter. Get spotted and the enemy's DEFCON level raises – max it out and you'll have to abandon your mission and escape the game's procedurally generated levels.



UNTITLED CRITERION GAME

Developer Criterion
Format TBC **Release** TBC

The *Burnout* and *Need For Speed: Hot Pursuit* studio wants to prove that it can do more than just cars, so this untitled project will put you in helicopters, jetskis, snowmobiles and wingsuits, all from an unblinking firstperson perspective. Early footage shows a pilot leaping from a helicopter to a quad bike, the whole thing inspired by the ever-growing popularity of GoPro adventure reels.



CUPHEAD

Publisher TBC **Developer** StudioMDHR
Format PC, Xbox One **Release** 2015

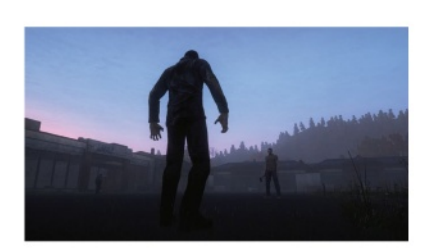
Cuphead's '30s-cartoon-inspired visuals appeal instantly, characters bobbing to the beat with the kind of exaggerated optimism that's so evocative of the era. Switching from XNA to Unity has set the project back a little, but the action-platformer is still making good headway, promising a focus on boss battles as well as visuals and audio created using the same techniques as its inspirations.



EARTHNIGHT

Publisher TBC **Developer** Cleaversoft
Format PC, PS4, others TBC **Release** 2015 (PS4)

Cleaversoft's debut is a dragon-heavy vehicle for the painterly cartoons of Paul 'Mattahan' Davey. It's a gorgeous but tough-as-scales roguelike runner in which the reptiles have ejected humans from our planet. As either unemployed photographer Stanley or a 14-year-old Sydney, you'll skydive onto and then platform along serpentine backs as you descend towards Earth and one of several endings.



H1Z1

Publisher/developer Sony Online Entertainment
Format PC, PS4 **Release** 2014

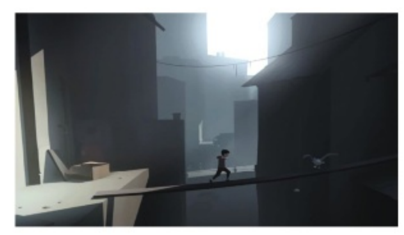
Thanks to *DayZ* and *Rust*, Sony's survival MMOG feels familiar – both a boon and a disadvantage, since SOE will have to work that much harder to distinguish itself from the competition. Where it differs is in its focus on building and defending your own towns and settlements, but you'll have to start at the bottom with just a wood axe and the clothes on your back before you get to that point.



HOTLINE MIAMI 2: WRONG NUMBER

Publisher Devolver Digital **Developer** Dennaton Games
Format PC, PS3, PS4, Vita **Release** 2014

Hotline Miami 2's drag-and-drop editor is an unfussy way to go about building your own grimy, soon-to-be-blood-stained levels, as simple and effective as a baseball bat to the face. During live demonstrations at E3, Dennaton artist Dennis Wedin was able to put together and furnish fully formed levels in a matter of minutes, and an early update will allow players to add in scripted events.



INSIDE

Publisher Microsoft **Developer** Playdead
Format PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2015

Fittingly, given Playdead's stated affection for Eric Chahi's early work, its latest pays great homage to *Another World*. Not least during a moment when its protagonist, a young boy, dives into deep water lit only by a thin beam of light – his angular movement even looking rotoscoped. The game will tell the story of that boy's fight against a group performing questionable experiments on humans.



LARA CROFT AND THE TEMPLE OF OSIRIS

Publisher Square Enix **Developer** Crystal Dynamics
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2014

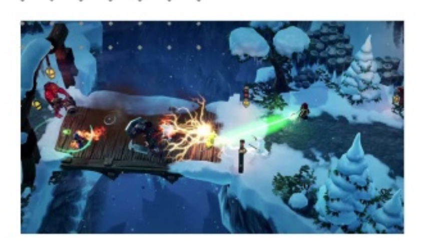
Lara Croft And The Guardian Of Light was one of 2010's better surprises, blending twin-stick shooter mechanics with an isometric take on Croft's globetrotting. This time, the backdrop is Egypt as you team up with treasure hunter Carter Bell and two imprisoned gods to defeat the evil Set. *GOL* was best with a friend, and *Osiris* expands on that, letting you team with up to three pals online.



LUCKY'S TALE

Publisher/developer Playful Corp
Format TBC **Release** TBC

Words With Friends co-creator Paul Bettner's take on a virtual-reality platformer is like an R/C *Titus The Fox*. Rather than have you view the world from Lucky's perspective, instead you'll follow the hero automatically, able to look around as you make him jump, run and headbutt blocks. On paper, it sounds unremarkable, but in practice the freedom to look around makes for surprisingly intuitive platforming.



MAGICKA 2

Publisher Paradox Interactive **Developer** Pieces Interactive
Format PC, PS4 **Release** TBC

Arrowhead's 2011 wizarding brawler came from the same school of friendly-fire-infused co-op as *Spelunky*. Fellow Swedish studio Pieces Interactive is on sequel duties, which should strain friendships just as effectively, and offers a suite of thousands of spells, the ability to combine up to five elements to create your Magicks, and Artifacts – new collectibles that act as buffs, nerfs and gameplay modifiers.



#IDARB

Publisher/developer Other Ocean Interactive
Format PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2014

Taking advantage of Xbox One's support for eight controllers, *#IDARB* is a four-on-four game that's part football, part *Smash Bros*, stripping both to the bare essentials and then cranking up the speed to a chaotic frenzy for something in the style of *Towerfall* with less death and more laughs. One-on-one action is fun, but the game kicks into a different gear with a full complement of players.



ODDWORLD: ABE'S ODDYSEE NEW 'N' TASTY

Publisher Oddworld Inhabitants **Developer** Just Add Water
Format PC, PS3, PS4, Vita, Wii U, Xbox One **Release** July

New 'N' Tasty is, Lorne Lanning is keen to stress, not simply an HD remake. Structurally, it's the *Abe's Oddysee* we remember, but it has been rebuilt with updated 3D graphics, rerecorded music and sound effects, a dynamic camera and an attractive lighting engine. It seems indulgent for a 1997 game (and fart jokes work irrespective of graphical fidelity), but then *Abe's Oddysee* was ahead of its time.



PILLARS OF ETERNITY

Publisher Paradox **Developer** Obsidian Entertainment
Format PC **Release** winter

Obsidian's top-down RPG shows what happens when you pitch a Kickstarter on a single and specific promise. Scale back the visuals a bit and you're looking at a game that could have come out during the Infinity Engine's late-'90s heyday. *Pillars Of Eternity* is text-heavy, tactical and fiercely old school, and the backers that poured in over $4 million in funding wouldn't have it any other way.



STAR WARS: BATTLEFRONT

Publisher/developer EA (DICE)
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** TBC

Less a trailer than a mini-documentary about the fetishistic attention DICE is lavishing on the team shooter's return, EA's E3 footage did give us our first glimpses of in-engine Stormtroopers and T-47s of breathtaking fidelity. It's a bar the finished game can't possibly meet, but it was clear the studio will stop at nothing short of the most faithful recreation of the original trilogy universe yet to grace gaming.



TITAN SOULS

Publisher Devolver Digital **Developer** Acid Nerve
Format PC, PS4, Vita **Release** 2015

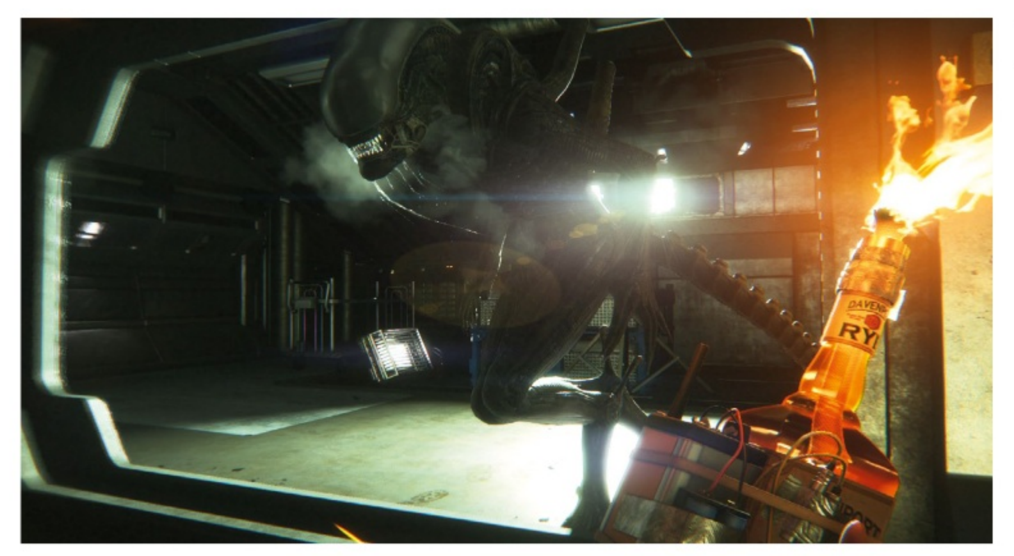
A level-one-restricted *Dark Souls* run suddenly looks less daunting next to the single health point that boss-centric action-adventure *Titan Souls* (no relation) supplies. You only have a single arrow, too, which must be retrieved each time it's fired – although you can retrieve it telekinetically by holding the fire button. Good thing, then, that the bosses also only have one health point.



THE TALOS PRINCIPLE

Publisher Devolver Digital **Developer** Croteam
Format PC, PS4 **Release** 2014

Croteam, the studio behind the brash *Serious Sam* games, is perhaps the last team you'd expect to debut a "metaphysical parable about intelligence and meaning in an inevitably doomed world". But that is how Devolver Digital describes *The Talos Principle*, a kind of a mix between *Portal* and *The Witness* that tasks you with solving puzzles involving lasers and tetrominoes in lush environs.



Fire will deter the Alien for a moment or two, but fuel is a scarce resource, and a flamethrower burst or Molotov will burn through it in seconds. Even with weapons, Ripley can't fight the creature, only evade it

ALIEN: ISOLATION

Publisher Sega **Developer** Creative Assembly **Format** 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One **Release** October 7

Alien: Isolation is beautiful, its aesthetic taken from the 1979 movie and expanded until Creative Assembly had envisioned an entire world in the same style. The studio's faith in the source material has made for a terrifying game, too, but it's possible its story's shocks and thrills will be good only once, even with a systemic, AI-driven alien hunting players differently every time. The answer, then, is a series of challenge rooms, the first of which was demoed at E3.

Each challenge sandbox places Amanda Ripley in a confined space with a distant objective and a lone Alien hunting her down. It's *Alien: Isolation* reduced to its most essential parts: Ripley, the alien, and as many stealth options as Creative Assembly can offer. Taking a cue from Rocksteady's *Batman* challenge rooms, each mission offers three objectives which, when completed, shave seconds off your recorded completion time. The thought of facing the Alien without a motion tracker is a terrifying prospect, but to do so while completing two additional jobs in Sevastopol Station's challenge spaces for a full 90 seconds of bonus time is near unimaginable. Few at E3 even saw the area's exit, and many more backed out early – the game's procedural scares as effective as anything the designers could script.



GRAND THEFT AUTO V

Publisher Rockstar **Developer** In-house (Rockstar North)
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** Autumn

It was no surprise at all that Rockstar chose E3 to confirm the existence of a revamped version of *GTAV* for PC, PS4 and Xbox One, but it says a lot about the power of the series that the game's trailer provoked so much positivity. The recently released *Watch Dogs* may demonstrate some innovative concepts of its own, but when it comes to open-world game design, Chicago has nothing on Los Santos, and Rockstar's invitation to return is made more appealing by technology that allows for a greater draw distance and the opportunity for its artists to re-render the world at a higher resolution, with more texture variety and a broader range of details all round. Now that PS4 and Xbox One have bedded in, it's easy to forget how eye-popping *GTAV* could be in its original form; exploring this enhanced treatment will surely be one of 2014's treats.

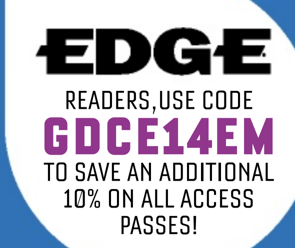


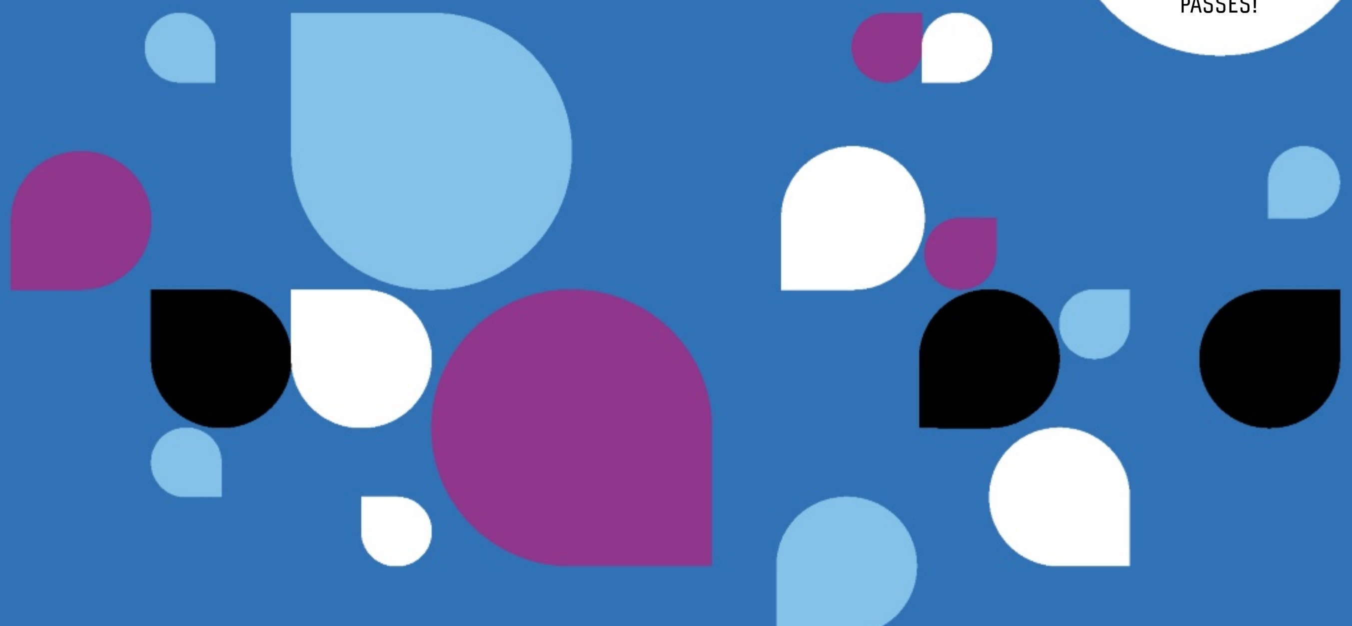
EVOLVE

Publisher 2K **Developer** Turtle Rock
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** October 21

Turtle Rock's four-on-one shooter splices *Left 4 Dead*'s teamplay with a '50s monster movie, asking a pack of hunters to fell a single mighty beast. Matches are tense affairs where predator and prey often trade places, the monster on the run at first, but a terror if it can feed enough to advance to its final stage. E3 saw Turtle Rock reveal the second creature of three, the Cthulhu-esque Kraken, as well as variations on the Trapper, Support, Assault and Medic classes. The Kraken is a mid-range Titan, able to fly and hurl down lightning and vortices before closing in for the kill with spiky tentacles. Maggie, meanwhile, is a Trapper with a bloodhound, which can sniff out the beast when it goes to ground, and Support robot Bucket has a UAV as well as a sentry gun. The potential for interplay between the full set of 12 hunters bodes well.

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#269



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VIDEOGAME CULTURE, DEVELOPMENT, PEOPLE AND TECHNOLOGY

94

122

76

98

84

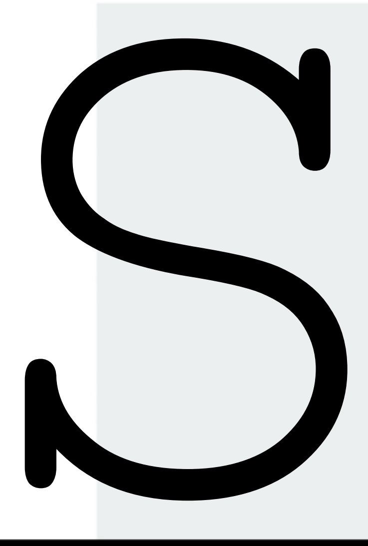
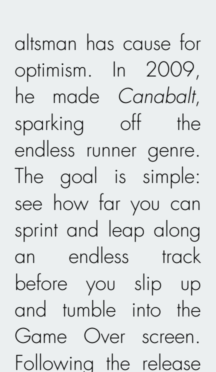
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Fashion Victims.

When it comes to of videogame, time is we have maybe five videogame genres to get really bored right now," game designer **Adam** grim look of concern. optimistic and naïve, meaningful videogame discovered."

By Simon Parkin.

discovering fresh types
running out. “I think
years to discover new
before people are going
with what we are making
independent
Saltsman says with a
“This may sound overly
but I think most of the
genres have yet to be

Saltsman has cause for optimism. In 2009, he made *Canabalt*, sparking off the endless runner genre. The goal is simple: see how far you can sprint and leap along an endless track before you slip up and tumble into the Game Over screen. Following the release of *Canabalt* – a game Saltsman designed during a week-long game jam – endless runners stormed mobile app stores. One example, the *Temple Run* series, has now passed a billion downloads; *Jetpack Joyride* has more than 100 million downloads to its name. If anyone has cause to believe new types of game are waiting to be discovered, it's Saltsman.

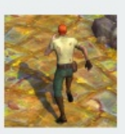
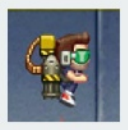
Eruptions of novel form and style like the endless runner are uncommon in videogames, but so are fatalities. Once-ubiquitous genres are often pushed to the periphery over time, but few styles of play ever truly vanish. "No media ever dies," Ninja Theory's **Tameem Antoniades** told an audience at Helsinki's Slush conference last year. "TV still exists, arcades still exist… the Venetian opera still exists. It was one of the most popular forms of mass entertainment in Europe, [but] when was the last time any of us went to a Venetian opera?"

The decline of a genre is a slow, creeping thing, and while today tens of thousands of enthusiasts play the latest Cave arcade shoot 'em up while text-adventure aficionados build their own interactive Twine stories, neither type of game thrives as it once did.

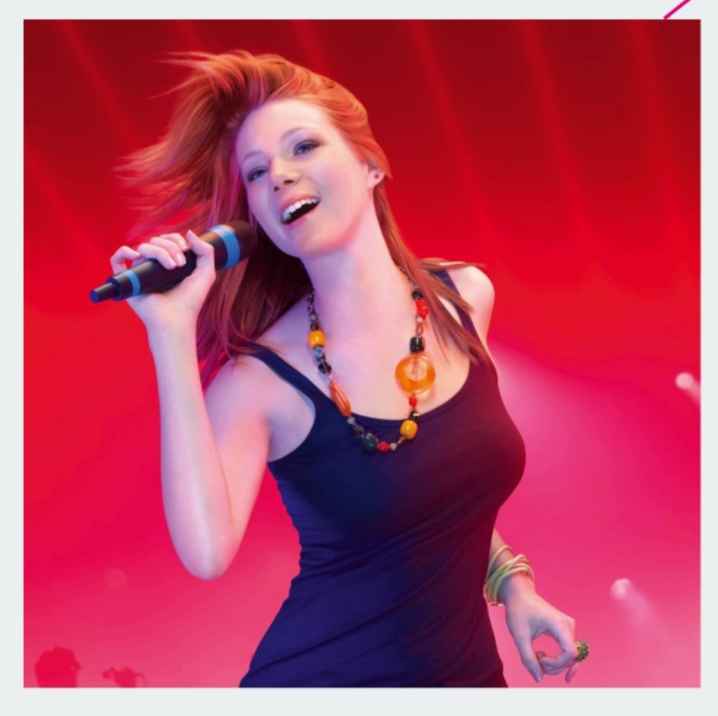
Genres instead tend to evolve, broadening their boundaries, drawing lessons or inspiration from one another and shifting into fresh shapes rather than dying out. Today, Activision staff refer to '*Call Of Duty* fatigue' to describe the growing ennui in the face of annual updates to the best-selling franchise. Familiarity usually breeds indifference when it comes to videogames.



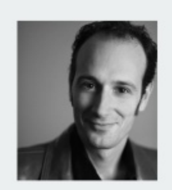
1996's *PaRappa the Rapper* was not Masaya Matsuura's first foray into music software. Earlier that year he also released *Tunin'Glue,* a game-like music mixer for Apple and Bandai's short-lived Pippin console

Canabalt, Temple Run and Jetpack Joyride may feel new, but the auto runner has its origins in the 1980s with games such as *BC's Quest For Tires*, which hit several 8bit systems



Sony London's *SingStar* gave Konami's karaoke-style rhythm-action games an MTV-like sheen that they had hitherto lacked, featuring original backing tracks, official music videos, and a stylish, uncluttered UI



Alex Rigopulos set up Harmonix with Eran Egozy in 1995. The studio has worked almost exclusively in the music genre ever since its inception

After *PaRappa The Rapper* popularised the rhythm-action genre in the late '90s, music games enjoyed a meteoric rise. Debuting in 2007, the *Rock Band* series sold ten million copies in its first two years. **Alex Rigopulos** and **Eran Egozy**, the founders of Harmonix, developer of both *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band,* featured in Time magazine's list of the 100 most influential people of 2008. The genre's unflinching rise even begat the launch of a *Rock Band* game themed around the music and career of The Beatles. Viacom reportedly paid $10 million for the rights to use The Beatles' music, but slowing sales from this point on eventually prompted an implosion that saw the genre and its attendant peripherals disappear from sale over a few short months.

"The music game genre reached saturation point by playing it safe," says **Dewi Tanner**, a game designer who worked at the Tokyo-based developer NanaOn-Sha with Masaya Matsuura, creator of *PaRappa The Rapper*. "From the start of the boom to the end, we only really had the



“FROM THE START OF THE BOOM TO THE END, WE ONLY REALLY HAD THE GUITAR HERO MODEL AND SOME SLIGHT VARIANTS”

Guitar Hero model and some slight variants: the same game with more instruments, or the same game in a different musical style and so on.” For Tanner, creative stagnation was the main reason for the genre’s decline. “Very few titles looked at new ways of using music for gameplay, and when they weren’t as successful as *Guitar Hero*, they were immediately dubbed as failures. Perhaps if more risks had been taken earlier in the boom then alternative subgenres would have grown in time before the great crash happened.”

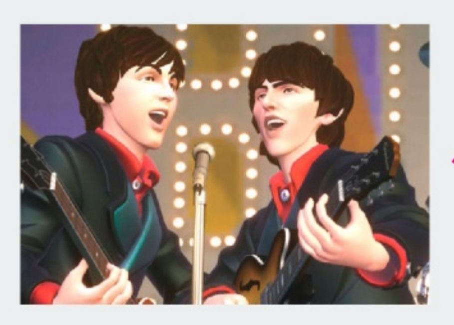
In the case of music games, some would argue Harmonix perfected the genre with *Rock Band 3*, its near-limitless downloadable playlists and flexible modes leaving little creative room for reinvention or reinterpretation. Likewise, *Super Mario 64* simultaneously introduced and almost ended the 3D platform game through its creative dominance. It’s a point of view that **Matt Boch**, a designer and project director at Harmonix, rejects. “There’s no such thing as a ‘perfect’ interpretation when it comes to videogame genres,” he says. “The best version of a particular game at a particular time is dependent on personal, cultural factors and technological factors, like platform. The best version of *Tetris* may be on the NES for many of us, but for others it’ll be the iOS version. It’s possible we’ve all still yet to play the definitive version of *Tetris*.”

Saltsman agrees: “The idea of perfecting a videogame genre relies on two faulty assumptions; one is that there is some kind of singular Platonic form of that genre, and the other is a kind of uniform or homogenous audience with the same feelings about that specific form. Neither of these exists in the real world.”

Nevertheless, he concedes that a particular genre can be explored and iterated upon to such a degree that both creators and consumers lose interest. “You can find yourself in a situation where most of the low-hanging fruit has been plucked from an orchard,” he says. “Whether that fruit is actually gone or the weight of precedence only makes it seem that way, the effect on many designers is the same: if there’s a more obvious harvest elsewhere, we migrate.” ▶

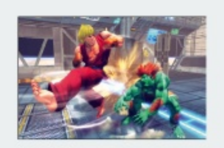


Matt Boch, designer and project director at Harmonix



Harmonix asked George Martin’s son, Giles Martin, to convert The Beatles’ original two- and four-track recordings into multipart version suitable for the *Rock Band* title based on the band’s career

Rock Band 2 launched at the height of the music game boom. Alongside the 84 songs included on the game disc, more than 1,400 additional tracks were launched for the game on a digital store, all of which were compatible with subsequent series titles

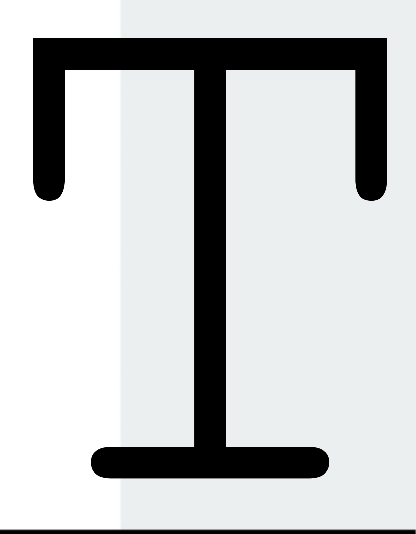



Street Fighter IV's revitalisation of fighting games was due to more than a graphical update – the first 3D titles in the series, *Street Fighter EX* and its sequels, failed to have a similar effect



James Newman is a senior lecturer in media and cultural studies at Bath Spa University and an expert in videogame preservation

"PLAYERS CAN'T KNOW IF THEY WANT SOMETHING NEW AND FRESH UNTIL THEY TRY IT; IT'S A CATCH-22 SITUATION"



he need for game-makers to break new creative ground while maintaining a certain familiarity for risk-averse players and publishers is one of the great paradoxes at the heart of this medium. "Players tend to prefer new versions of familiar games," argues **Julian Gollop**, director of the original *X-COM*. "They can't know if they want something new and fresh until they try it; it's a catch-22 situation."

"Players are like any consumers in that they find the familiarity of what is already known and understood not only reassuring but essential to make sense of products and experiences," says **James Newman**, a senior lecturer in media and cultural studies at Bath Spa University.

For Tanner, meanwhile, the curve towards iteration rather than bold invention is something dictated by the market as much as anything else. "It's usually a safe bet to take something that's popular and come up with a twist or innovation that makes it worth engaging with [again]," he says. "This is the kind of hedged risk that allows most games to be funded. Making leaps of faith is a bigger risk and therefore a much harder sell. It's like needing to cross a canyon with no bridge – you'll have to make the bridge yourself and hope people like what is on the other side."

If overfamiliarity is a slow-burn terminal illness, the shifting sands of technological disruption can sink a genre in an instant. "The videogames business, like other technology industries, prides itself on its apparently continual forward motion," says Newman. "Some of the rise and fall of videogame genres is simply to do with natural cycles of fashion, but there is a technological element at work, too."

In the early days of the medium, technology dictated content. "Certain genres, particularly in the earliest days of gaming, were defined by creative solutions to technological limitations," Newman says. "The link between videogames and sci-fi must surely be partly attributable to the ease with which you could draw black backgrounds in the '70s and '80s. You get the black for free, so just add a couple of pixels of light and you have a starfield."

As time has marched on, however, technological advancement has injured as many genres as it has created. "If we think back to the emergence of the first generation of 3D consoles," Newman says, "the idea of making, selling or even wanting to play the kind of 2D platform game that had been the staple of the 1980s and 1990s was practically unthinkable.



The iterative nature of game design within a strict genre template is evident in both the design and titling of Nintendo's most famous series: 1983's *Mario Bros* evolved into 1985's *Super Mario Bros*



For many, *Super Mario World* perfected the Mario template in the Super Nintendo era. Its sequel, *Yoshi's Island*, took the series down a different road. Arguably Nintendo wouldn't return to this pure style of play until *New Super Mario Bros* on Wii



Super Mario 64 may not have invented the 3D platform game, but it set the bar so high that no rivals in that hardware generation came close to its power and appeal

I remember the widespread disappointment expressed about *Yoshi's Island*, which seemed to come from a different age now that realtime 3D and polygons had arrived. 2D games appeared to be dead: they just didn't look modern any more."

Side-scrolling beat 'em ups, scrolling shoot 'em ups, point-and-click adventures, top-down racers and countless other 2D genres were lost to the 3D revolution of the mid-'90s. Gollop, for instance, witnessed both the emergence and decline of PC strategy games, an ebb and flow that he believes is directly linked to technology. "The rise of realtime strategy games was to some extent driven by the PC/mouse combo," he says. "It was the same with firstperson shooters: these were game genres that rose out of their interfaces. Technology also played a role in their waning popularity. The decline of RTS games matched the decline of PCs as gaming platforms and the rise of more powerful consoles, which were not really suited for that style of play."

But today, turn-based strategy games are coming back, thanks in part to active communities backing the likes of Gollop's own *Chaos Reborn* on Kickstarter, and new technologies offering new ways to explore old ideas. *XCOM* is arguably at its best when played on an iPad's touchscreen; even action game specialists such as Ninja Theory are exploring the touchscreen's potential for the kinds of games they specialise in. "The touchscreen, yes, it limits you," Antoniades told Slush. "Certain genres don't work on it, [but] throughout the course of history, from arcades to consoles to PCs, games have died. The 2D side-scrolling beat 'em up has gone. Entire genres of gaming won't exist or have a very clunky existence on mobile. But, happily, things like the point-and-click adventure game genre are coming back." Fitting then that Ninja Theory's first mobile game, *Fightback*, is a 2D side-scrolling beat 'em up.

The return of certain genres, often decades after they were initially popular, is sometimes driven by nostalgia for the former eras that they represent. For instance, Yoshinori Ono, producer of *Street Fighter IV*, has argued that Capcom once believed it had perfected the *Street Fighter* formula with *Street Fighter III: 3rd Strike*. But nostalgia for the series enabled its reemergence after almost a decade, smartly updating the underlying formula with Focus attacks as well overhauling the game graphically.



Best known as the designer of ***X-COM***, Julian Gollop has a slew of titles to his name, including 2011's experiment within the ***Tom Clancy*** universe, ***Ghost Recon: Shadow Wars***

"It's generational," says Harmonix's Boch. "I don't think we'd have the rise of puzzle-platformers if *Mario* wasn't big in the '80s. I don't think we'd have the resurgence of adventure games if this generation of developers hadn't grown up playing LucasArts and Sierra games. In many ways it's similar to the reason why we have new, high-quality reboots of My Little Pony or Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: the people whose childhoods were deeply impacted by those characters are now at the age where they are making the media and they want to share the aspects of those characters that were special to them with a new audience." ▶



Super Mario Sunshine was Nintendo's bold and idiosyncratic attempt to take the 3D platform game in new directions. For many, it fell short of its glorious predecessor

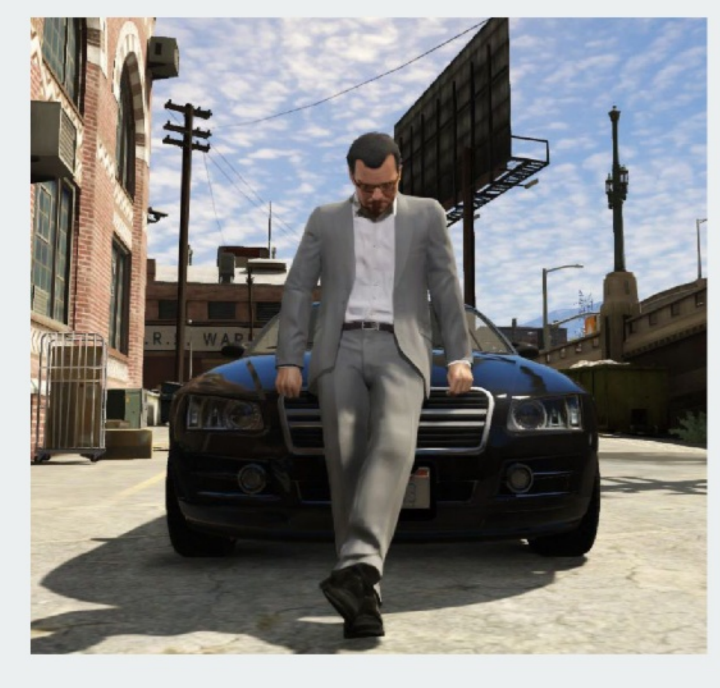
But if many types of game are cyclical and immortal, then the notion of genre itself isn't. According to the American novelist **Rick Moody**, genre is "a bookstore problem", not a literary problem. His point is that categories exist not to guide or restrain creators, but to aid shopkeepers; when a book, film or videogame can be neatly categorised, it has its place on the shelf. For Moody, the idea of fixed genres robs an artform of its indefinable edges as well as the flexibility to draw inspiration from other styles. Moody's point is applicable to videogames, too – an RPG's experience points can be layered atop another game's stealth systems and another's platforming, so how should the resulting chimera be classified?

Indeed, many of today's biggest and most respected games, such as *Tomb Raider*, *Mass Effect*, *BioShock* and *Assassin's Creed*, defy a simple genre tag, and yet videogames are still often grouped by their dominant verbs – running, shooting, jumping, hiding – and these can help as much as hinder. "I think genre classifications are useful," says Gollop. "If you are pitching a game and identify its genre, this can be a shorthand to immediately communicate the idea to a potential audience. But I like games that tend to stretch or transcend the established genre definitions – they are more likely to have something innovative about them."

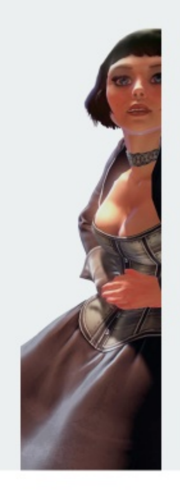
For Boch, the idea of fixed game genres is more problematic. "The use of genre in games is kind of broken in the way that it refers willy-nilly to both content and form," he says. "What is *Saints Row IV*? A satire or a sandbox? What is *Brütal Legend*? A music game or an RTS? They're all of these things and many others at the same time. That said, finding an audience is one of the most important things for many developers and, as such, classifications like genre can be useful, in so far as a potential player can figure out what kind of experience your game might offer. They also play an important role in organising most digital game marketplaces."



A challenge for developers working with a classic series is how to evolve an established template without discarding what made the original game popular. Opinion is divided as to whether Crystal Dynamics succeeded in this with its *Tomb Raider* reboot



The *Grand Theft Auto* series may be the quintessential open-world game, but that term is becoming increasily redundant given the variety of types of game that fit under its broad umbrella



Valve's digital marketplace, Steam, favours identifying tags rather than traditional genre classification, perhaps to reflect the fact that the lines between videogame genres have become less defined. Today, genres often spill into one another and some games, such as *Grand Theft Auto V*, encompass multiple genres into a single entity. Rockstar's opus is variously a shooting, driving, business simulation and tennis game. Designers at Sony Computer Entertainment even brainstorm new ideas by placing the titles of dissimilar games in a hat and drawing out names to create unusual hybrids.

"It's clear a key methodology in contemporary videogame development is combining elements of genres to make hybrids," Newman says. "In that sense, 'genre' as it refers to videogames isn't always enormously helpful, [because] there are approaches to game development that set out to confound our attempts to categorise. However,

SAVED BY KICKSTARTER The genre revivals powered by the crowd

Planetary Annihilation
Uber Entertainment's new RTS is being created with the involvement of many of the team members responsible for *Total Annihilation* and *Supreme Commander*. The game raised approximately $2.2 million on Kickstarter.

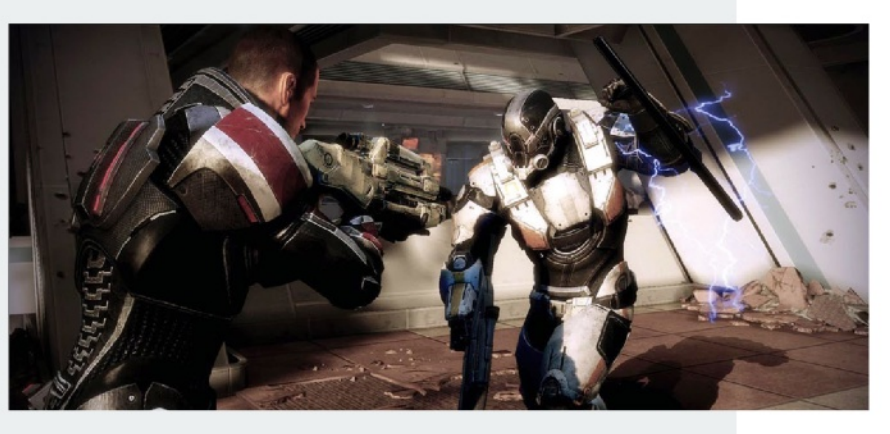
Shadowrun
This revival of the 25-year-old isometric FASA RPG resurrects a genre long out of fashion. *Shadowrun* itself is a genre mashup of a dystopian cyberpunk future and high-fantasy creatures. The game raised around $1.8 million.

Wasteland 2
Another top-down RPG, *Wasteland 2* will be the first official sequel to the 1988 original, which inspired the *Fallout* series. The game raised approximately $2.9 million, and is due for release on Windows, OS X and Linux.

Broken Age
Perhaps the best-known genre-reviving game here, Tim Schafer's *Broken Age*, aka *Double Fine Adventure*, is an adventure game in the style of *The Secret Of Monkey Island* that was ludicrously over-funded by fans of the genre.

Elite: Dangerous
A sequel to David Braben and Ian Bell's era-defining space combat and trading game, allowing you to "fight, trade and hunt your way across a giant galaxy of billions of star systems, starting with a basic starship".

"THERE IS A WHOLE GAMUT OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE OF WHICH WE'VE BARELY SCRATCHED THE SURFACE"



BioWare's *Mass Effect* series began life as an RPG but in subsequent games it became more of a traditional shooter. These days, even individual series defy genre classification

simultaneously, it's quite easy to find games that stick closely to the parameters of genres that were laid out many years ago. Many games are all the better for not dramatically playing with the kinds of codes, conventions and expectations that the genre establishes."

One thing that most designers and academics agree upon is Saltsman's assertion that there are a great many more genres to be discovered. He maintains developers have "only discovered the corner-most tile of the chessboard" in terms of ways to play.

For Gollop, it's likely that new genres will emerge in the aftermath of a disruptive new technology, just as the MMORPG was seeded by broadband Internet connections. "There certainly are genres left to be discovered and they are possibly connected again with the issue of input devices," he says. "I can imagine something directly reading your brain waves, perhaps creating 'emotion-driven games'; or perhaps with sufficient AI development we will get better natural language input with intelligent responses. There is a lot of scope for amazing stuff still to come."

For others, innovative ideas will unlock new genres. "There is a whole gamut of human experience of which we've barely scratched the surface," Tanner says. Newman agrees: "One of the things that is interesting about videogames is that for all the innovation in certain areas, types of gameplay have remained remarkably consistent. Some styles and genres fall from favour and may resurface later, but the palette of things that you can do in videogames has been pretty stable so far. I would be surprised if there weren't innovations in the future.



"One thing we should probably also remember is that videogames are still a comparatively young medium. If you think about how film developed and what the early days of film as a form looked like, it is probably fair to say that in those days, few people, whether they were makers or audiences, would have guessed that the 90-minute narrative would have become the norm. It might be that what we currently see in the history of videogames to this point is still the beginning of the journey, and the form and format that comes to define what videogames 'are' has yet to be created."

Boch is excited not only for the unforeseen genres, but also about the scope for invention within existing categories, both current and largely forgotten. "Much as there is still wonderful new orchestral, jazz and rock music being created, despite the emergence of music such as hip hop and contemporary pop, I think we'll still see new works in many of the existing genres we know and love." ■



AN AUDIENCE WITH...

KARL MAGNUS TROEDSSON

EA's DICE boss on innovation, virtual reality, and (not) being the bad guy

By Mike Gapper

Over the past 16 years **Karl Magnus Troedsson** has worked at almost every level of the game industry, starting as a level designer and artist for defunct PC developer Unique before becoming a producer then executive producer for EA's DICE studio in Stockholm. Today he is the VP, general manager and CEO of EA's Swedish and American DICE studios, and is overseeing Visceral's work on the next *Battlefield* game: *Hardline*. Speaking after EA's E3 conference, Troedsson discusses the new console generation, *Battlefield 4*'s teething troubles, and why EA really is a company willing to take risks.

DICE helped launch the new console generation with *Battlefield 4*. What kinds of games do your studios consider to be representative of new-generation play?
Each genre, each game, each team will have a different answer to that question. I always find that in the transition to a new generation of consoles, there are a lot of buzzwords around [like] 'every game is going to use movement', and that's not true. Early on we decided human movement, from Kinect or something like that, isn't suitable for a very fast-paced genre like shooters, but there are some [new] elements that are really cool. You can have more information pushed to a tablet or something like that. Pressing the button to capture footage and share it is super-cool, and suits us really well.

The most important part for us was the sheer raw power of these consoles, meaning that we could go to 60fps for our game and then push the bar so we could go to 64 players on consoles as well. For DICE, those were the key components for going next-gen. At last year's E3, that didn't perhaps fulfil people's fantasy of what next-generation games would actually be. But I actually think now, when people start playing *Battlefield 4*, they'll realise that it's been [a core change]. We'll see where we go in the future. There might be voice commands we start using more…

What are the most difficult challenges your studios have faced over the past few years, as new console hardware has emerged?
In the state we're at now, most games are shipped on three platforms: current-gen, next-gen and PC. We need to stop saying 'next-gen' at some point. If you have any kind of ambition – which most game teams do – you want to maximise your game on those platforms, right? That means you have more work to do. If you want to balance making a great game with being successful business-wise, those are the permutations you need to create. We had [been] planning for this for quite some time from a technology perspective with Frostbite, of course, and when we did *Battlefield 3* there was already a lot of work going into the engine to prepare us for the next-generation consoles. At the same time you can never prepare all the way because the XDKs and SDKs are always coming in late. This year and next year I think we're going to start seeing that game teams are really maturing.

***Hardline* represents a very different take on *Battlefield*. Did you push for innovation among the DICE studios working on the new consoles?**
Innovation has been a bit of a buzzword for many years now. Some people associate innovation with large, revolutionary changes to an established franchise. That might be true, but if you have a long-lasting series of games you have to be careful about that as well. You need to think about the incremental steps [because] you can't alienate your old fanbase. Well, you can if [that's your choice], but we don't want to do that. Innovation can come in different shapes and forms. In [*Hardline*'s] case we're introducing a brand-new setting that comes with new weapons, new vehicles, gadgets, etc. You can argue [whether] it's innovation or not, but it's a big change for us. In a franchise like *Battlefield*, when we introduced vaulting animations, you can't put that as a back-of-the-box feature, but to the core established [players] that innovation is the one they were waiting for. On the other hand, you might introduce more dynamic concepts like 'levolution'. I know that people hate that word; we still haven't found a better word to describe it.

How did you go about preparing Visceral for working on DICE's long-time franchise?
We wouldn't have asked Visceral to build a *Battlefield* game or trusted them with it if we didn't think they could deliver. We haven't tried to change the way they work. I strongly believe that established teams have a modus operandi, a way of working, a culture… and if you start working with them, the wrong thing would be to go in there and try to change their core values. You maybe give some hints, tips and tricks regarding how they are supposed to go about things, because you have a lot of experience with building *BF* games, but you don't mess with that core culture. You can challenge part of it, but if you feel that you need to go in and change something like that, you probably engaged the wrong team. I'm confident with the team that Steve Papoutsis is running and the ▶

The *Battlefield* series has long been DICE's bread and butter, so it's little surprise to see EA looking to explore the breadth of its appeal by introducing *Hardline*



entire studio they have inside of Visceral, mostly because we have collaborated with them for several years. Visceral built one of the expansions for *BF3*.

Having a new studio build a game in an established franchise is a big task and a lot of work to take on. A lot of muscle memory that an established team has, the new one doesn't. Lots of people have been travelling between the two studios in Stockholm and California just to get that knowledge across. Building a *BF* game is such a huge undertaking; there are people from all over EA involved. There's always one studio that owns it and carries the bulk of the work, but when it comes to actually shipping and finishing a beast like this, there are a lot of people involved. There are people from BioWare involved, even. Naturally we have some people at DICE helping out with some parts of the multiplayer, but the core game is still being built by Visceral. We just draw on the experience we have inside the company.

To what extent are you planning to invest in VR?

I wrote a paper on VR when I was a young guy in school, back when The Lawnmower Man was released. VR had a bit of an uptake then. Now it's back, which is super cool and I'm personally really excited about it. We are definitely interested in it – we're doing tests and playing around with it – but it's not like we're jumping on it and building a VR-only *BF* game. It has clear limitations. Again, most shooters are very high-paced, precision-based games, and when you try these things out you find they can be an overwhelming experience for you as a human being, with regards to your spatial awareness. That doesn't go hand-in-hand with something where you want to pixel-shoot something in an FPS game.

I think we're going to start to see different versions of VR as well. I think there's going to be a spectrum here. Are you going to Google Glass's augmented reality, or is it full 'always immersed in the world' VR? I'm really glad to see that the hardware manufacturers are putting effort into this – like the Morpheus, etc – and it's something we'll continue to play around with. We have some cool ideas about what we could do inside of an established franchise like *Battlefield*, and we'll see what happens in the future.

Why did it take an entirely new console generation to revive *Mirror's Edge*, and what makes it so worthy of revival when it was so unsuccessful before?

It starts with that game idea – do we believe in this? Then, do we have a team that is passionate about building it? After *Mirror's Edge* we took some time for serious [thinking]: what are we going to do with this game? Is this a one-shot or a franchise-to-be? Is it just a lovely memory for people or should we actually do something else with it? We were in that state for quite some time, focusing on *Battlefield* and other stuff as well, but then this team stepped forward with an idea saying, 'Here's what we want to do with the *Mirror's Edge* IP', with some changes to it compared with the first one which I can't go into here.

But there were some key changes to the core recipe which basically, for a lot of people, just made it click: 'That's a game that needs to be built'. It's such a good idea, and now everything fits together. So then it quickly became a passion project, which a lot of people are very dedicated to building. The reason it deserves to be built now is that we think we have a great idea for a game. It's not a long-lasting series just yet, but we believe we have something that people are going to enjoy and that's why we're going to build it.

***Battlefield 4*'s launch was marred with bugs and problems that dogged the game for months. How can you reassure players about the future of the series?**

Let's start by saying that we acknowledge the fact that people have had problems with the game. I won't go into detail regarding what went wrong. What I want to say is that, from the get-go, we've been dedicated to fixing this. It has taken some time, to the point where we delayed DLC and did several things in the background that people didn't see. We have the whole family of DICE teams [on it] and people at Visceral have been helping out, making sure that *Battlefield 4* is what it is today. We've patched it and improved it even further. We're going to keep taking care of our games.

Naturally we're dedicated to making sure that the next game we launch, *Battlefield: Hardline*, is going to have a better launch, which is why we have a beta already. But it's about looking at, and taking care of, our product. There's one thing I want to get across, which I think is really important here: some people say, 'You're annualising the franchise now – does that mean you're going to give up on the other game?' I want people to keep playing *BF4*. Our commitment to *BF4* is going to continue, even after *Hardline* is out – fixing problems, fixing bugs that might occur, balancing issues, and even introducing new features. We are going to be committed to running games more in parallel; previously we ran them more in a serial way.

That expansion has led to the formation of a new Los Angeles studio, but how much of DICE LA is comprised of remnants from *Medal Of Honor* developer Danger Close?

The old *Medal Of Honor* studio is not the DICE LA you see today. When we formed that studio we had a couple of key recruits on the old team when they moved over. When you look at the spread of talent inside that studio now, the majority are new recruits. I can't wait to

CV

Karl Magnus Troedsson began his career at Unique Development Studios, where he quickly graduated from artist to producer. He joined DICE in 2001 shortly after the launch of *Battlefield 1942*, and produced *RalliSport Challenge 1* and *2* for Microsoft. As senior producer he shipped his first *Battlefield – Bad Company* – and as executive producer he oversaw *Bad Company 2* and *Battlefield 1943*. Today he is a key part of EA's executive management team, where he oversees production on *Star Wars Battlefront*, *Battlefield Hardline*, *Mirror's Edge* and the inevitable *Battlefield 5* from DICE Stockholm.

"SOME PEOPLE LIKE TO CALL OUT EA AS THE BIG BAD WOLF, BUT I THINK IT'S ONE OF THE MOST CREATIVE COMPANIES THERE IS"



EA took the new *Mirror's Edge* to E3, offering a glimpse of the game far earlier than it ordinarily would, or perhaps should. Its debut was little more than confirmation that the game still exists

start talking about what we're doing there, but that's for the future. I know [Danger Close] carries some negativity for a lot of shooter fans – they didn't like *Medal Of Honor*. The senior talent inside that studio comes from the old DICE Stockholm office. It's a bunch of Swedes basically running the studio.

What has the cultural change been like at EA over the past few years? Is the door still open to IP experiments like *Dead Space*?
Absolutely, otherwise we wouldn't be allowed to build [the new] *Mirror's Edge*. We have new things boiling in the background that we're not ready to show in full. At the conference we gave a sort of status report and showed a work-in-progress version of some games, and for me that's a significant change for the company and how we think about things. We can dare to show products that are in production and say, 'It's coming when it's ready – don't ask about an end date because perhaps we don't even know yet'. I know there's a big appetite from my boss, Patrick, and his boss, Andrew Wilson, to have a creation process for new IPs without losing focus from our established franchises. There's definitely some really cool things happening inside EA, both from a games perspective and also from a company perspective.

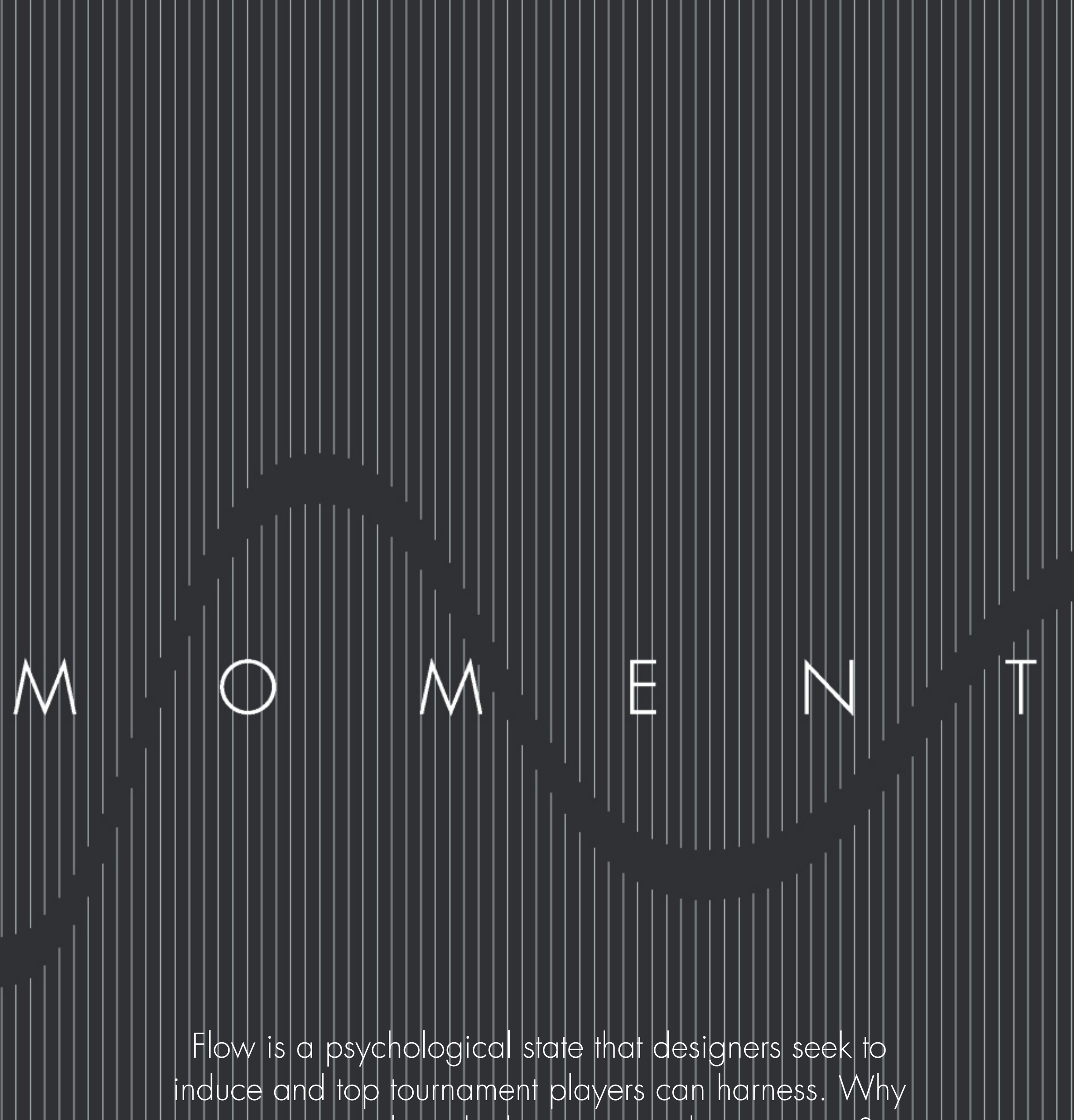
There's an Internet following that likes to call out EA as the big bad wolf in the industry, but I can tell you this: I've been working at DICE since 2001. We were purchased by EA, and I think EA is one of the most creative companies there is. It consists of a lot of people who are very passionate about building and publishing games, but especially from my perspective, about developing games. We do this out of passion. We want to build the best games we can. I think if you go to Criterion or BioWare or any other studio, they will in some shape or form tell you the same thing. We're really passionate about what we're doing. Inside of the family of EA we feel very good about it. Naturally it's our responsibility to convince people, show people who we are and show our passion. That is, I would dare to say, a little bit of what we tried to do at this year's press conference: 'Here we are – this is us, the people behind the game'.

Activision has said that the industry has no room for small games. Is that something you agree with?
I won't talk about their strategy, but our strategy is slightly different. We believe there is room for new ideas and for new IP that can come out of the gate and perhaps not be billion-dollar franchises from the get-go. Putting that on a new IP from the beginning is not the right way of going about it. I'm a strong believer that if you have a great game and a passionate team [and] a conversation with your fans, then business success will follow.

That's not always true – you have great games that come and go because they didn't manage to get their business side together, but if the focus is on the game team and the creative side, that's usually a good recipe for success. At the same time, there is the reality that we want our games to be successful. It's our responsibility to think about the business part. I know that talking about money can almost be a forbidden subject for some people. I don't think it should be, though. We're running a business as well. We're in this business because we're passionate about making games, but one doesn't come without the other.

Why does EA seem to have a hard time convincing people of its passion for game development?
I actually don't really know. I think with every organisation that grows to a certain size, people start to question it a bit. We have made mistakes in the past, perhaps we made some bad choices and business decisions... Every company does that. The only thing we can do then is rectify that and show people that this is what we're about now. I don't think that it's unique to EA, but what I think is unique right now is how we talk seriously about this inside the company: we don't want people to perceive us like this, we don't agree with the image that people say we have, and we want to show them who we are. That involves perhaps letting people look a little bit closer at what we're doing. ■


I N T H E



MOMENT

Flow is a psychological state that designers seek to induce and top tournament players can harness. Why is it so special, and what can you do to attain it?

By Joel Snape



Evo Moment #37, as it's known to the fighting game community, is perhaps the most famous example of flow in videogame history. Even if you don't recognise the name, there's still a good chance you're among the 25 million people to have watched it on YouTube. The minute-long clip documents a *Street Fighter III* match between **Daigo Umehara** and Justin Wong at the Evo 2004 tournament. Wong, playing a conservative Chun Li, is winning soundly. Umehara's health is perilously low, but the match isn't over and he quickly deals a lot of damage before pulling back. With Umehara keeping his distance, Wong launches into the Houyoku Sen combo, knowing that even the chip damage from blocked hits will kill his opponent. Then the unthinkable happens. Having predicted this, Daigo goes on to parry every single strike of the 17-hit combo, before launching into an attack of his own that does enough damage to win the fight. The crowd goes wild. Umehara may have been the calmest person in the room. "At that moment, I didn't hear the crowd roaring," he told Tokyo Keizai Online in 2013. "If I had heard it, I don't think my comeback would have succeeded."

It's an astonishing moment, and made even more so by the circumstances it was conducted in: the crowd, the tournament pressure, and the playing-away disadvantage. Yet perhaps that's what made it possible at all. "Flow is an optimal state of consciousness, a peak state where we both feel our best and perform our best," says **Steven Kotler**, co-founder and director of the Flow Genome Project. "It is available to anyone, anywhere. But there's something interesting: videogame players get into flow so frequently that flow theory has become the most widely accepted theoretical framework for explaining [the medium's] lure. Studies have shown that the amount of flow generated by a videogame directly correlates to everything from player engagement to overall product success."

Flow is not a new concept. It was given its title in the '70s by Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. He was carrying out what still stands as one of the largest studies on happiness ever conducted, attempting to find out which activities produce the deepest enjoyment and greatest satisfaction for the widest number of people. The word 'flow' came up again and again, relating to everything from rock climbing to working on assembly lines. The same descriptions of it occurred repeatedly, too: a state where everything was done fluidly, where difficult decisions were made automatically, and where tough physical or mental tasks were performed effortlessly. Just as importantly, Csikszentmihalyi identified flow as a state that people would actively seek out, and he broke down the conditions for achieving such a state: there must be a clearly defined, doable task; that task must provide instant feedback; there must be no distractions; and it must be a challenge that's difficult enough to be interesting, but not beyond your own skill level.

As Kotler explains: "Game designers rely heavily on the three key psychological triggers of flow: the challenge/skill ratio, clear goals and immediate feedback to bring on the state." He also argues that extreme athletes, with their clear objectives, are pushing the boundaries of what's possible in the state. "Risk will help you get to the state, for sure, but there are other ways."

Games and players have been tapping into flow almost since they were invented – consider the marathon sessions behind the record scores set on games such as *Defender* in the early '80s – but more recently designers have begun consciously pursuing the state. *Flow*, developed by Thatgamecompany co-founder **Jenova Chen** to illustrate ideas outlined in his USC masters thesis, marked a watershed moment. "My key goal during the production of *Flow* was to evaluate whether a flow-theory-based active dynamic difficulty adjustment mechanism could work on players with various skills and knowledge about gaming," Chen says. "My MFA graduation thesis is about how to improve the chance for players to enter the state of flow. Rather than making choices for the player through data gathering and designer interpretation, I prefer giving player choices to customise the challenge they encounter through core gameplay in a subconscious way."

Flow was downloaded 100,000 times within two weeks of its release. It's celebrated for its unusual mechanics, but more conventional games can trigger exactly the same feelings. "Flow happens a lot with music and rhythm games such as *Rock Band* and *Rez*," says

"FLOW IS AN OPTIMAL STATE OF CONSCIOUSNESS, A PEAK STATE WHERE WE BOTH FEEL OUR BEST AND PERFORM OUR BEST"

Jamie Madigan, creator of the Psychology Of Games website. "You just let your eyes, ears and fingers take over so that play feels automatic. Good matchmaking and sliding difficulty are key, but other games can mimic the experience with some thought. Driving games that let the player dial in varying amounts of assistance – shifting, braking, tyre maintenance – in order to match their level of skill are a good example. It's about making the game just challenging enough without the player constantly failing."

Much of this is already well understood. More theses followed Chen's Flow In Games, and in 2007 **Dr Erik Gregory**, the executive director of the Media Psychology Research Center, wrote that "placing players in flow is the key to videogaming's universal appeal". Efforts are under way to explore the neurobiology of flow – the most prominent so far being a 2011 study that pitted experienced players against bots in games of *Tactical Ops: Assault On Terror*, then measured their brain imagery with functional magnetic resistance imaging (fMRI). But what remains relatively unexplored is the role that flow plays in multiplayer games and elite-level play, or how ▶

BIRD BRAINED

Do you need dynamic difficulty adjustment, branching paths and fine-tuned gameplay to create a game that flows? Not necessarily. *Flappy Bird*, before it burned out like a Roman candle, saw thousands of players talk about it in ways that echo the state, but is also an illustration of the downside of flow's chemical underpinnings: by mimicking the adrenaline and dopamine surge of genuine achievement, it hooked people for much longer than **Dong Nguyen** intended. "I just wanted to create a game people could enjoy for a few minutes," he told the Wall Street Journal, shortly after taking it off the iTunes store. "It was just too addictive."







From top: Seth Killian, designer; Steven Kotler, Flow Genome Project director; Jamie Madigan, doctor of psychology



THE CHEMISTRY OF FLOW

What happens in your brain when flow occurs?

Implicit thinking: In experiments on chess players, researchers using electroencephalogram imaging to measure brain activity found that it decreased in the prefrontal cortex, the bit of the brain responsible for higher cognitive function. Meanwhile, theta waves increased, indicating an increase in decisions made without conscious awareness. The implication? During flow, the subconscious takes over, making decisions based on internalised patterns and move sequences.

Fast decisions: Novel stimulus prompts a multistage decision-making process, going from baseline to problem-solving analysis, pre-action readiness, post-action analysis, and back to baseline. Each produces a different brain 'wave', but elite performers harness them better, and are able to make explicit decisions (like Umehara handling Wong's moves) and then instantly switch to the implicit system.

Time dilation: One of the most common expressions of flow is the sense that time slows down. In fMRI experiments, researchers have discovered that this is linked to multiple areas of the brain. "Time is a democratic conclusion reached by the brain," says Kotler. "Because flow deactivates large parts of the prefrontal cortex, our ability to perceive [time] is distorted." This also accounts for not 'hearing' crowds: as focus tightens, more processing power goes to a smaller range of stimuli.

Feel the love: The neurochemical dopamine is released when we take a risk or encounter something novel, rewarding exploratory behaviour by increasing heart rate, pattern recognition and muscle-firing timing. In a flow state, it's released alongside endorphins, which relieve pain and produce pleasure just like heroin. That's why you're addicted to *2048*.

No fear: Finally, the body releases anandamide, a neurotransmitter that elevates mood and amplifies lateral thinking. And once the flow moment's over, there's a hit of serotonin – the feel-good hormone that ensures you'll be back for more.

players can harness a flow state to push themselves towards high-performance play.

Kotler makes the point that being in an environment surrounded by peers – such as Yosemite National Park's Camp Four, where climbers collaborate to advance bouldering techniques – can help to harness that state, and here players have a huge advantage. "The Internet is *already* that environment," he says. The flip side is that games can be more restrictive. "We know that creativity triggers flow. So a Camp Four climber could attack a route from a totally different angle to pull [their personal triggers]. A gamer doesn't [always] have those options; it's up to the designer to build those creative opportunities into the game. Can I play *Doom* more creatively?"

That depends on how you think about *Doom*. "Certain games can be played in ways even their designers didn't foresee or intend," fighting game champion and designer **Seth Killian** says. "In fighting games, for instance, many techniques or combos have been discovered by people 'in the lab', playing in Training mode and testing a game's limits or exploring the code directly, and for a long time many of these were thought to be basically impossible to use in actual games. Eventually, however, there's usually someone somewhere who does find a way to implement the technique in a live setting."

It can't be coincidence that flow often occurs in tournament play, where a trigger traditionally not attached to games – an element of genuine risk – comes in. "My guess is that being together around other great athletes automatically raises the stakes for each of them as individuals," Killian says. "They want to look their best in front of peers, and this, maybe even beyond the prizes at stake, can really focus you. Personally, my moments of flow have always been at tournaments, or at least when I feel there's a lot at stake. The main effect is that it feels almost like 'you' disappear from the game. Everything is still there, of course – you are playing, there's the game, the opponent – but it feels almost like a kind of autopilot.

"The challenge is the critical element here, and in my mind, that's what distinguishes flow from mastery. You can reach genuine mastery of a game without ever achieving a flow state. To find flow, there has to be something on the line. If part of you knows you can just start over and do it again, it tends to undercut the experience. To me, flow is what mastery is for. It's the feeling that comes from true mastery set against a challenge that legitimately puts you at the edge of your skills. You are taking so much in; you're so completely consumed by every bit of feedback the game is giving you that conscious thought gets squeezed out of the equation."

Not all multiplayer game loops engender flow equally, either. "*Call Of Duty* has some moments of flow in team matches," says **Johnathan Wendel**, better known as Fatal1ty, who in 2013 was the highest-paid professional gamer in the world. "But it happens more in *Quake* and *Painkiller* because of the speed of the game. What takes two or three minutes to do in *COD* could take place in an arena shooter like *Quake* in about 20 to 30 seconds; mistakes and great shots are happening at a more frequent rate, there are situations of control… [and] moments where one kill can lead to five kills just because one mistake was made. Capitalising on these flow situations can make the difference between being a champion and not."

Does flow drive elite performances in solo play? Killian thinks so. "I tend to get at least a taste of flow in very kinaesthetic games," he says, "such as *Super Meat Boy* or *Spelunky*. I follow a bunch of speedrunners, and manual speedrunning seems like a clear path to flow. If you're streaming your run, you are playing in front of an audience, playing versus your best time or maybe a world record. It's about creating a context that raises the stakes and pushes you to the limit."

So how should designers build for flow, and what does it mean for players who won't ever taste the rarefied air of the Evo tournament or QuakeCon? "Immediate, clear and useful feedback on performance is the most important thing," Madigan says. "Giving the player the tools he or she needs to find the right difficulty and feedback are key."

"Anything that drives attention into the now helps precipitate the state," Kotler says. "*Minecraft*, *WOW* and *The Sims* have very little in common, but they all use the same basic science to drive you into the same state."

Perhaps most importantly, then, the key is to remember to give the player room to adapt. "At a base level,

"CAPITALISING ON THESE FLOW SITUATIONS CAN MAKE THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BEING A CHAMPION AND NOT"

designers should give their players the flexibility and tools to go beyond what is necessary and into the range of extraordinary," Killian says. "If designers really understand their game's core mechanics, they should elevate them, let the game communicate as clearly as possible, and include the possibility of nuance, or at the very least get out of the player's way. Excessive handholding and restrictions might help a bunch of people have an average experience, but you want to give them the room to be amazing."

That kind of room, of course, is what can help you predict and counter the Houyoku Sen. It's what can make a roomful of fans get to their feet and cheer, and what can still give you chills when you watch a video of a decade-old fighting game match. And, perhaps more importantly, it's what can keep you playing and improving forever. Or to put it in the words of Daigo Umehara when asked about his great feat: "If you can feel that you love what you're doing, that's the ultimate talent right there. Ever since I was little, that feeling that 'I love games' remained undefeated among all other kids. I still hold on to those childhood feelings, which makes me believe that I can still grow." ■

THE MAKING OF...



XCOM: ENEMY UNKNOWN

For Jake Solomon, remaking the brutal strategy classic was a war against the enemy within

BY JAMIE RUSSELL

Format 360, PC, PS3
Publisher 2K
Developer Firaxis
Origin US
Release 2012

Power Gamer, an indie gaming store in Glen Burnie, Maryland, has just welcomed a new employee. The thirtysomething new hire roaming the aisles on this late-September day in 2012 doesn't seem to know much about retail, though. Perhaps that explains why his sales technique is so aggressive.

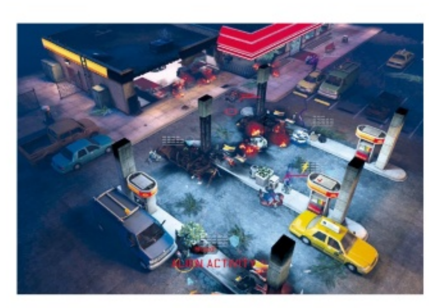
"Hey, what kind of games are you into?" he asks one shelf browser, barely waiting for an answer before shoving *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* under their nose. "You like RPGs? Well, then, boom!" *XCOM* isn't out yet, and this guy's pitch isn't quite ready either. "Your soldiers are out there dying from decisions you've made," he tells one uncertain-looking woman, alluding to the game's permadeath system. "You're crying and you feel terrible. Does that sound like a good time?"

The punchline is that this hilariously pushy salesman is really the lead designer of *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*, **Jake Solomon**, underselling his deep, complex game for a jokey viral marketing video as part of the reboot's launch. "That thing was down to **Garth** [**DeAngelis**, producer]," says Solomon when reminded about his retail adventure. "We were out drinking and he said [adopts a drunken voice], 'I have this idea…' When he told me, I was like, 'Man, get the fuck out. I'm not going to do that!'"

The video was inspired by an old Reebok advert in which then-New England Patriots running back Danny Woodhead tries to sell his own NFL jersey. Unlike Woodhead, though, Solomon isn't shy. "People were walking in and I was accosting them, and none of them had even heard of *XCOM*. After 30 minutes, I was bored of myself, at which point I started saying the dumbest shit and hoping it worked out."

Solomon trying to hawk his game to disinterested shoppers sounds gruelling, but next to making *XCOM*, selling it was comparatively easy. The game's development was a punishing experience that took its lead designer from a boisterous self-assertive type to the depths of self-doubt. "There was one night," DeAngelis says, "when I went to his office and there was a look of total despair on his face. That was a peek behind the curtains, as it were."

All his working life, Jake Solomon had wanted to remake *X-COM: UFO Defense* (AKA *UFO: Enemy Unknown*). It was the game he played in college. It was the one that convinced him to drop his plans to become a doctor and switch his major to computer science. It was the game that he was obsessed with. Even when he took a job with Firaxis, the home of Sid Meier's turn-based *Civilisation* series, Solomon remained enamoured with Microprose's early-'90s classic. It was his Holy Grail.



To save the world, you sometimes have to blow it up a little. *XCOM*'s eerie X-Files-esque environments are destructible, with shifting safe spots forcing both sides to stay mobile

ALL HIS WORKING LIFE, JAKE SOLOMON HAD WANTED TO REMAKE X-COM: UFO DEFENSE. IT WAS HIS HOLY GRAIL

"*X-COM* is one of the greatest games of all time," Solomon says with the enthusiasm of a true fan. Featuring distinctive aliens, a punishing learning curve and deep systems, the game combined realtime base management and turn-based combat as you attempted to save the Earth from an extraterrestrial threat. Infused with the same sense of mystery as The X-Files, the series built up a loyal following before realtime strategy outings such as Blizzard's *StarCraft* made turn-based gaming seem dated.

Convinced the long-dormant series needed an update, Solomon lobbied Firaxis to let him handle a reboot. When his bosses – including Microprose co-founder Meier – agreed, he threw himself into the project. It would be a torturous five-year development cycle. *X-COM* was, it turned out, a tough game to remake.

With the team blinded by nostalgia and reverence, the first prototype was a disaster. Like the original, it had time units, there was no cover, and you controlled a large squad. Maps had a random element to them. It was everything *X-COM* was – apart from fun to play.

"It was this checklist of shit that made *X-COM* special," Solomon recalls. "We expected the magic to spring out of this checklist." But, it seemed, *X-COM* was more than a list of parts. "If you recreated somebody atom by atom, would they still have their soul? Games are very much like that. We basically recreated *X-COM* atom by atom. It should have been this perfect magical reincarnation. Instead, we got this automaton; we got this golem monstrosity that felt very soulless."

Solomon's design wasn't working; he would have to abort and restart. It was the first of many reboots, redirections and changes as the designer grappled with not simply remaking *X-COM*, but reimagining it. Yet with each new change of direction, swathes of design, art and coding had to be scrapped.

"We're an iterative studio by nature," explains art director **Greg Foertsch**. "It's in our DNA to correct and adjust." Even so, the scale of the adjustments was huge, resulting in many dead ends. Large-scale enemies were planned and then dropped. The cover system evolved, changing the nature of combat. A Skyranger with a lift-off roof was built to accommodate ten soldiers, then scrapped after squad sizes shrank.

The game's realtime strategy element – in which players manage the XCOM base and research new tech – was a particular challenge. "We went in a full fucking circle," says Solomon. "We started with this 3D globe, and it was real fun, and then we went to turn-based, then we went to a card-based system, and at the end we came back to this realtime globe system. It was a moment where it was patently obvious [we'd looped back on ourselves] and it was a question of 'Wait a minute, we already did this and you said it wasn't the right idea… But now you're saying this is definitely the right idea?' That was the shakiest moment."

Elsewhere, such frustrations might have led to mutiny. But Solomon's talented and committed team had faith in him, even when he didn't have faith in himself. "Jake won't say this," laughs DeAngelis, "but he is a great leader. Actually, he probably would say that! But I think one of the signs of a great leader is someone who can ▶

admit their mistakes and he's done that a lot, [both] publicly and to the team."

Every time they changed direction, Solomon would face his troops. "I'd fucking eat my hat in front of everybody and say mea culpa, beat my chest and say sorry. I think that helped, though, because then I was able to say, 'Look, this is why we did what we did. This is why we're going to do something new. It's going to be better. Sorry."

The emotional cost of such a strategy was high, however, particularly for Solomon. "The *XCOM* development changed my personality quite a bit," he says. "I wasn't super-successful, but I'd never had any kind of failure in my career." Indeed, learning to acknowledge his mistakes and embrace the lessons they taught was the steepest challenge for the designer. "Failure is not a bad word. It's a natural part of the process. That's the thing you kind of have to get over as a creative person, and it's very hard. I think that was something I learned."

It had a domestic cost as well. "I remember sitting with my wife outside in front of a fire and – I never expressed this to anyone on the team – I told my wife: 'We are not going to be able to stay in this house. The game is not going to be a success and we are going to have to move.'"

Throughout the development of *XCOM*, Meier was Solomon's mentor, a father figure in the office down the hall whose La-Z-Boy recliner became an ersatz shrink's couch. But while Meier has been making games for decades and could lend his experience, *XCOM* wasn't his baby.

In truth, probably only one person could understand the frustration that Solomon and his team were going through: **Julian Gollop**, director of the original game. Gollop wasn't involved in the remake – he wouldn't meet Solomon until after it had shipped – but he knew how this design could turn the screws on you as a developer.

"*UFO: Enemy Unknown* was a hard game to make," Gollop says. "In my case, [it] was very ambitious for such a small team. It was also a unique and unusual design with lots of interacting elements – nothing like the carefully structured player experience of so many games today.

"There were many significant pseudo-random elements in the game: the UFO appearances, flight paths, mission environments, deployment of aliens, composition of tactical maps, and so on. Plus, you had interactions between the strategic level, such as the funding of countries and building of bases, and what happens in tactical missions. It created a certain unpredictability and complexity in the game. I'm sure Jake would have had problems dealing with this, and I think he tried to create a more structured and balanced experience with *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* while still keeping as many of those complex, pseudo-random interactions as possible. No mean feat."

Solomon is wary of agreeing with that, mostly out of respect for Gollop's original game. But he does admit *X-COM*'s deep systems presented difficulties. "It's very interconnected. If you pull this level over here, you don't realise that it will break something ten hours into gameplay. That was the really difficult part. I didn't make the original game, so when I started changing it, I had no idea what would happen."

One thing that was easy to nail, however, was the tone. "*X-COM* was like finding a shark in your living room," says Solomon. "It's a very weird phrase, but if you know the original game, that's what it's like when you find these Sectoids in the middle of a wheat field. What makes it scary is the juxtaposition of things you feel comfortable with and something terrifying. It's like finding a fucking shark in the middle of your living room."

That phrase became one of the planks for Foertsch's art team. "It's the same feeling when you're in a gas station at night – or in a field with a flashlight – and venturing alone into the darkness," the art director says. "That's a common feature that really helped the mood and tied it into the original game, too." And so, about 12 months before *XCOM* shipped, the team was finally unified and the game was on target.

Released in October 2012, *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* was met with a deluge of praise. *X-COM* fans rallied around Firaxis's reimagining and Gollop himself publicly praised it, saying it relieved him of his long-standing itch to make an updated version of the game ("He is incredibly, incredibly generous for a guy who doesn't have to be generous," says Solomon).

What did the team learn from the experience? "If we did something new, we'd say, 'This thing is not going to be fun; it's going to look like shit until all of a sudden it doesn't,'" says Solomon. "[On *XCOM*], we really stressed about it not looking good, not playing well. It's more important that you're going in the right direction, taking positive steps. Eventually, it will happen."

That iterative approach, however, requires a costly thing: time. "Some things on this project were just luck," says Solomon. "We were lucky 2K let us take the time we needed. They gave us almost five years. They were smart to do that, but I don't think I would have asked for that. If we'd had six months less, we'd have made a 70 Metacritic game. I don't say that for effect. If we'd had a year less, we would have stuck with our original prototype and made a 60 Metacritic game. It would have been a pebble in a pond and it wouldn't have made any difference. If we hadn't had the time 2K gave us, we wouldn't be sitting here having this conversation."

Where would they be? "Well, I'd be at Power Gamer, applying for a job." ■



Julian Gollop
Director and co-designer, UFO: Enemy Unknown

When and where did you first meet Jake Solomon?
I first met Jake in March 2013 at the Game Developers Conference in San Francisco. We were doing an interview together about *X-COM* old and new. We talked about how *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* came to be made and what happened during development. He was clearly a great fan of the original, and somewhat nervous about what I would think about the new *XCOM*.

The original game is still infamous for being incredibly difficult. Did you like the way that the reboot was balanced?
Yes, the balance was very well done. I've failed at the game many times, but each time I didn't feel cheated. I could always point to a few earlier decisions that could have been made better. That's the mark of a great strategy game.

How much has the gaming landscape changed since 1994? Do you think there's less challenge in modern games?
Players want a more guided experience in the early stages of gameplay and don't want to read too much. It used to be RTFM [read the fucking manual]. Now it's, 'WTF is a manual?' Everything is more visual, animated and dramatic. Players want to experience the story rather than make the story. I guess this comes from the vast expansion of the video and computer games playerbase. Turn-based strategy games were a bit of a niche then, and now they are really quite an oddity. This is why *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* is a really important game. It planted a flag deep within enemy territory and captured a new audience for turn-based strategy gaming.













1 Early designs of Carapace armour and the Archangel suit. The latter enables soldiers to float above the combat zone.
2 *Enemy Unknown*'s squads are smaller than the original's, but remain customisable. Giving them names invests you still further in their survival.
3 This concept art captures *XCOM*'s nocturnal feel: dark forests and empty night-time streets befit your shadowy foe.
4 Nothing beats the tension of exploring your first UFO.
5 Researching alien tech gives access to new weapons. Laser pistols mean no more reloading on the battlefield.
6 Players start with two Interceptors, the first line of defence against UFOs



STUDIO PROFILE

CRYTEK UK

How German technology saved a British developer in an unstable market

By Chris Schilling



Founded 1999 (as Free Radical Design)
Employees 130
Key staff Karl Hilton (managing director), Hasit Zala (game director)
URL www.crytek.com/career/studios/overview/nottingham
Selected softography *TimeSplitters*, *Second Sight*, *Haze*, *Crysis 2*/*Crysis 3* (multiplayer)
Current projects *Homefront: The Revolution*, *Warface* (360)

Homefront: The Revolution's tale of guerrilla warfare in a near-future Philadelphia pits a small but close-knit team against a large occupying force with more expensive equipment and far greater firepower. It's a narrative analogous to Crytek UK's situation: while it may have advanced tech of its own, here is a studio whose current project faces a struggle for territory in a genre ruled by *Call Of Duty* and *Battlefield*.

The developer's story is also one of triumph over adversity. The studio was founded in 1999 under the name of Free Radical Design by three ex-Rare staffers who'd worked on *GoldenEye 007*: David Doak, Steve Ellis and **Karl Hilton**. Yet despite a number of successes – most notably with the *TimeSplitters* series – by 2008 the studio was facing administration. In May that year, its new PS3 exclusive, *Haze*, had underperformed critically and commercially, and while the studio had been working on *Star Wars: Battlefront III* for LucasArts, sweeping changes at the publisher led to key management staff exiting and some projects – *Battlefront* included – being cancelled.

LucasArts offered the studio a small payment to buy out its contract. Free Radical had received no money from LucasArts in six months; without the funds to pursue the case in court, it had little choice but to accept. Later that year, a potential deal with Activision to remake *GoldenEye* fell through without explanation. After suffering a nervous breakdown, Doak quit, and Ellis and Hilton were left to deal with the administrators.

Hilton is now Crytek UK's managing director, and the only one of the three co-founders to remain. "A whole host of issues came together from Free Radical's point of view," he recalls. "The credit crunch was vicious; suddenly, lots of projects were being cancelled, everyone was looking at what they were spending money on, and Free Radical bore some of the brunt of that. Plus, there was a console transition going on at the time, which is always a tricky time for games. It was just a perfect storm of events that hit us."

From around 200 staff, the studio was whittled down to 44. The company went into administration just before Christmas 2008 and Crytek wouldn't enter the picture until early in the new year. Ellis and Hilton needed to impress upon the administrators – who knew little about the game industry – the viability of Free Radical, but it helped that the studio's reputation preceded it. "There was interest from day one," says Hilton. "Both Steve and I were extremely hopeful a rescue was possible. Neither of us wanted to dare think it wouldn't happen. It always seemed [like] someone would come forward."




Karl Hilton (left) and Hasit Zala have worked together since Free Radical Design's formation 15 years ago. Hilton was the studio's co-founder; Zala was its first recruit

He also admits that the buyout was only possible thanks to the loyalty of the remaining Free Radical staff. "On January 2, we came back to the office. We didn't have a buyer, and everyone showed up," Hilton says. "It was one of the most humbling things to see everyone turn up again, and [the Crytek acquisition] wouldn't have been possible if half the team had disappeared. The situation wasn't perfect by any means, but we had this close-knit group of people who believed in a lot of what was being done and were prepared to try to stick by us."

> **"STEVE AND I WERE HOPEFUL A RESCUE WAS POSSIBLE. NEITHER OF US WANTED TO DARE THINK IT WOULDN'T HAPPEN"**

Hasit Zala was among them, having been lead programmer on the *TimeSplitters* series. "The term we used then was 'team leads'," he says. "This was back in an era where we didn't really have producers or designers – we were just a bunch of developers making a game. When Crytek bought us, one of the key things within that very strong core group of people who'd been with us for a long time was a very high skill level. People had that intuitive muscle memory of working together and that knowledge base."

Crytek's arrival could have been quite a culture shock, but the transition, suggests Zala, was easier than anticipated. "They've been utterly brilliant from day one," he says. "There was this [concern] initially: are they going to throw in a layer of management on top? Are they going to take creative control or production control? Are they going to [impose] their systems, their process, their culture? But it's not been like that at all. They've been super-trusting. They said, 'Look, we've got this technology. You use your team, your culture and your experience and work the way you want to work.'"

The publisher has given the studio its engine and infrastructure, as well as an opportunity to flourish. "They don't want to take overarching control on a micromanagement level," says Zala. "Working with top creative at central Crytek is more of a collaborative effort."

Being able to work directly with CryEngine undoubtedly made it easier for the newly named Crytek UK to adapt. Yet while its core team remains, there have been changes to the working environment and the studio's methodology. Zala says that while Crytek didn't come in with diktats, the studio's first assignment working with the *Crysis 2* team on that game's multiplayer component saw it move from the waterfall method to an agile development process. And while Crytek UK's development teams are spread over two floors, adopting an open-plan layout has made communication easier, too.

In the early stages of *Homefront: The Revolution*'s creation, meanwhile, coders, designers and animators were split into goal-focused groups, before being shifted back into departments towards the end of development. "But it's still fundamentally the same relationship," says Hilton. "Because you've still got all these different artists and designers and so on having to work together and understand each other's needs… That's the reason I love the game industry: there's such a diverse set of talents that [have to] come together to make a game." ▶





Crytek UK employees are invited to share their ideas, and the open office is conducive to this, as well as the agile development process the company has adopted since the buyout

Still, *Homefront: The Revolution* represents quite a departure for the studio. After all, Free Radical was best known for *TimeSplitters*, an FPS series defined by idiosyncratic characters and a surreal sense of humour. "I always evangelise it or talk about it in retrospect as this very developer-indulgent game," says Zala. "We just came up with stuff: 'Oh yeah, monkeys! That would be cool. Let's make them smaller and put them in. That's amazing'. And we'd have robots and zombies, and we had a lot of fun poking fun at movies… It was whatever came into our minds. It was a very unstructured project. It was very creative in that respect, but confusing to marketing people, who didn't know how to market it [to a global audience]."

The benefit of Crytek's involvement, then, was to help curb such indulgences. "We always had an ambition to make a really big game," Zala says, "and for something like that, you need a central, coherent vision, something much more structured." The trade-off is far less spontaneity in the final stages. "I do enjoy those games where you can say, 'Oh, what the hell, let's bring in this Ozzy Osbourne character,'" Zala admits. "So it goes both ways, really."

Not that development of Crytek UK's current project has passed without incident. Having worked on an expansive multiplayer game for over a year, that was scrapped to focus on a singleplayer campaign. *Homefront: The Revolution* is now something of an anomaly: a narrative-led open-world shooter with a co-op mode, but no competitive online component.

Crytek UK learned a hard lesson from working on *Crysis 2* and *3*'s multiplayer – namely, that it had misjudged the importance of accessibility, so while both games retained a small core of elite players, they failed to break out beyond their niches. Still, the success of Crytek's F2P *Warface*, which focused on a familiar, accessible set of principles rather than visual fidelity, did inspire the team to try again.

"We'd built out large-scale multiplayer using CryEngine tech, with vehicles and so on, and it was all very cool," says Zala, "but when we looked at it and asked what it offered against, say, *Battlefield*, we had to ask ourselves whether it was more compelling… That was a difficult question, because we were playing something fun and well-executed that had that accessibility, but was it enough to pull people away?"

Despite the radical shift that followed, there's clearly a belief here that the studio can make a success of its *Homefront* sequel. Even if the game does underperform, Crytek UK is in a stronger position than before to adapt. Upstairs, a small team is working on a 360 version of *Warface*, and Hilton is aware of where the company's future is likely to lie. "A lot of companies see their future in online, free-to-play and freemium gaming – certainly Cevat [Yerli, president] has said that's a longterm direction for Crytek. We're making that transition now. Boxed product is not going to go away, but it's going to decline in importance, and as a company you don't want to be reacting too late [to trends]."

Even as it looks forward, is there a temptation for this established studio to revisit its past? A *TimeSplitters* comeback would surely be warmly received. "You'd never make *TimeSplitters* now the way we made it and put it in a box and sell it in a shop," Hilton says. "That's just not viable."

Perhaps it could find an audience as a multiplayer-focused game on one of the digital services, though? "Like any good brand – and *TimeSplitters* was a good brand – I don't think there's any value in carbon copying that for a new set of technology," Hilton says. "You might get a few people who'd really enjoy it and it's always fun to see something running better and faster, but you'd need to distil what the core competencies of the game were – the things that people really liked – and then bring it to new tech, while learning from other multiplayer games that have done things differently [since].

"I think Crytek has always said it would like to return to it one day. We're obviously very busy at the moment. With the right opportunity at the right time on the right platform in the right form, yeah, absolutely. What that would be at the moment…" He shrugs and laughs quietly.

"YOU'D NEVER MAKE TIMESPLITTERS NOW THE WAY WE MADE IT AND PUT IT IN A BOX AND SELL IT IN A SHOP"

After such upheaval, and despite the ongoing pressures of an industry in constant flux, there's a remarkable sense of calm at Crytek UK. Hilton says that while he hopes the studio is recognised for its technical excellence, having worked hard to develop and advance the CryEngine tech, he's equally keen that it's known for being an open, creative and happy working environment. "You can work on the best projects in the world, but if somewhere has got a reputation for being a bit of a slave-driving place, you don't want to go and make those games there. It's just not worth it. Hasit and I both believe that a good work/life balance is really critical for good work." ■



1 *Crysis 2*'s multiplayer was Crytek UK's first project.
2 2000's *TimeSplitters* won plaudits on PlayStation 2 for its 60fps multiplayer.
3 *TimeSplitters 2* saw the series move to GameCube and Xbox. An HD version was started but then shelved.
4 The heavily publicised PlayStation 3 exclusive game *Haze* was a rare misstep.
5 A Crytek team continues to work on F2P title *Warface*.
6 2015's *Homefront: The Revolution* has evolved into an open-world shooter



REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Titanfall Xbox One
The second and third time around, *Titanfall*'s level-up loop is even better than the first. After returning to level one, suddenly you're levelling faster and better than ever. You'll be back to your original loadout within a few days, but beware those level 50s who never regenerated, with their empty black icon. They don't care about unlocks or prestige; they care only about killing you, and they have all the best tools for the job.

Watch Dogs PS4
When in the history of videogames have insta-fail stealth missions ever been fun? Ubisoft learned lessons from the dismal mission design in *Assassin's Creed 3*, but perhaps not in time to save the five-years-in-development *Watch Dogs* from some antiquated insta-fail stealth design. Still, the occasional campaign misstep hasn't kept us from enjoying playing the game like Judge Dredd. Wrong name on library ticket? Illegally downloads media? Killed a dolphin? They'll never see us coming.

Trials Fusion PS4
Already faster than all your friends? We know the feeling. But the prospect of online tournaments has reinvigorated our attempts to grab those last few Platinum medals. The first free *Trials Fusion* update also includes ten user-made tracks to compete on, with prizes of gear, bike parts and – unnecessary given the reserves we've built up playing offline – in-game cash.


Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra Play content

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE

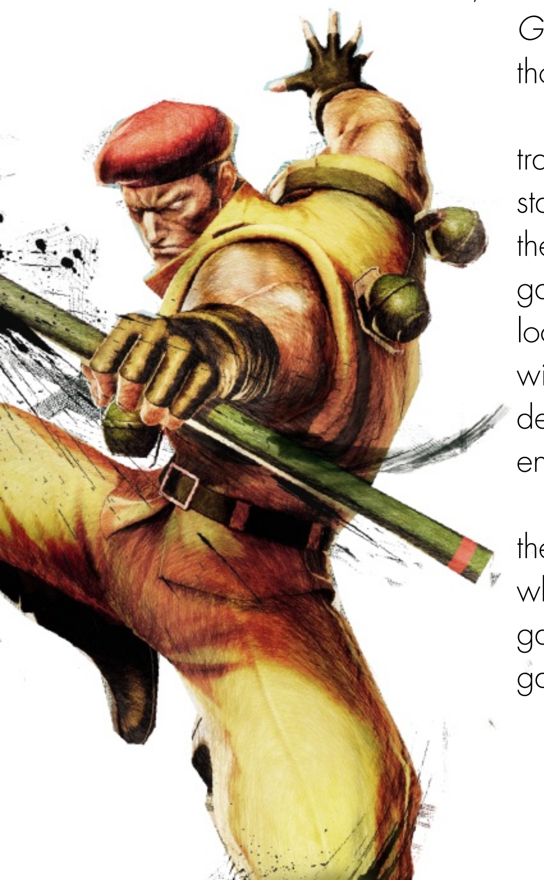

www.edge-online.com
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Contraction pack

How times have changed. It used to be the case that creators, and creators alone, defined the direction a series would take. *Super Mario World*'s design had nothing to do with what players thought of *Super Mario Bros III*, for instance, yet nowadays it is a rare thing indeed for developers and publishers to entirely ignore what their fanbase thinks.

Perhaps because it is impossible. The lines of communication between creators and players have never been so open, so widely used, and so frequently abused. When Codemasters set out to make *Grid: Autosport* (p114), the negativity from its hardened playerbase could have filled an entire design document. The result is that, unusually for a sequel, things have been stripped right back. There are no headline-grabbing new modes or features; gone is the garage, the player's collection of cars, and the well-meaning, if ultimately pointless, narrative. Even *Grid 2*'s luxurious menu system has been pared back. It's a thoroughly atypical approach to a sequel, but it works.



At first glance, *Ultra Street Fighter IV* (p104) is more traditional. It has five new characters, half-a-dozen new stages, some new modes and a couple of additions to the battle system that have a drastic effect on the way the game is played at a high level. Yet this, too, would have looked quite different had it not been made in consultation with its players. So important was fan feedback to *Ultra*'s development that the community manager hired to collate it ended up playing a key role in the game's creation.

It's not a guarantee of success. And nor should it be: there's something to be said for authorial control at a time when there is always someone prepared to tell you why your game is the worst ever. But clearly there's a future in making games with your community rather than by committee.

Ultra Street Fighter IV

Street Fighter II's combo system was an accident. Capcom never meant for players to be able to cancel an attack's animation with an early input of another move. It was spotted during bug testing, left in place, and went on to define a genre. Development team sizes are much bigger nowadays and QA processes are more thorough, but you still have to wonder how much of what players have found in the *Street Fighter IV* series was part of Capcom's original plan.

SFIV has always been a little bit broken. The first game had infinite combos and character balance problems. *Super SFIV* and its *Arcade Edition* expansion had what were colloquially – although technically incorrectly – called unblockables, where a specific sequence of moves would end with a jumping attack that randomly hit you in front or from behind. And the competitive scene has been dominated by 'vortex' characters, who can knock an opponent down, use one of half-a-dozen different ways to dole out heavy damage thereafter, and then put them back in the exact same situation. So with *Ultra SFIV* – seemingly the final iteration of the game that brought a forgotten genre back to the fore – Capcom had quite the job on its hands. The result is a game that, as well as boasting 44 characters in its roster and the expected raft of little tweaks, contains brand-new systems that fundamentally alter the way the game is played.

Some are simpler than others. Delayed Standing, performed by pressing any two attack buttons as you're knocked down, makes you stand up 11 frames later than normal. It kills unblockables stone dead, and nullifies vortex play too – at least for the time being. In Japan, where *Ultra SFIV* launched in arcades in April, strategies are already being formed to counter it. A successful Delayed Standing input displays a message onscreen for a full second before the knocked-down player returns to their feet, so players are learning to look for that and delaying their next assault accordingly. For the time being, however, the solution works. The result is a game that's slightly slower paced, perhaps, but for the right reasons: a single knockdown is no longer enough to turn a round in a player's absolute favour. Japan's response to that has been mixed, and your own will likely depend on your character of choice. Akuma, Cammy, Seth and Ibuki players simply have to work a little harder now. Either way, it's a simple solution to two complex problems that Capcom has fixed with just two buttons.

That's appropriate given that the Focus Attack, performed with a simultaneous press of both medium attacks, was *SFIV*'s most transformative addition to the genre template. It's a move of tremendous power and versatility, used both defensively (to absorb a hit) and when on the attack (cancelling it with a dash to extend combos, or charging it up to crumple an opponent to the floor), but it has its drawbacks. That it can only absorb a single hit makes it no help when escaping the relentless pressure of a rushdown or vortex character, for instance. And when on the attack, the difficulty of executing the move in the middle of a lengthy combo makes for a steep learning curve for the beginner players that Capcom so craves.

Publisher/developer Capcom
Format 360 (version tested), PC, PS3
Release Out now, August (PC)

Red Focus adds another layer of versatility to the most rewarding combo system this genre has ever produced



The solution is the Red Focus Attack, which is performed with three buttons instead of two and costs Super meter to use. Used defensively, it will absorb every hit that comes your way until its animation ends. Used in combos, it will instantly crumple an opponent when the buttons are released, irrespective of how long it's been charged for. The former offers an escape route from entire combos, while the latter opens up a host of possibilities, essentially giving every character in the game a way to combo into an Ultra. It particularly benefits grapplers: the likes of Zangief and Hakan used to have to rely on very specific setups to land Ultra combos, but now a single punch can be the gateway to half a lifebar's worth of damage. And for Ryu and Rufus, who already have plenty of ways of setting up an Ultra, Red Focus adds another layer of versatility to the most rewarding combo system this genre has ever produced.

If Red Focus sounds powerful, it's because it is, but it's been smartly balanced. When used in the open, it costs one of your four chunks of Super meter. Any absorbed hits make a greyish dent in your health bar that slowly refills unless you take a hit, in which case you forfeit the grey segment. Meanwhile, a mid-combo Red Focus Cancel costs three-quarters of the Super bar, a hefty chunk of what was already considered the most important resource in the game. A failed Red Focus Cancel can be every bit as disheartening, and fatal, as a blocked Super or Ultra.

Red Focus is a logical fit for the final iteration of *SFIV*. It's an effective bit of kitchen-sink design, as if Capcom is a primary school teacher unlocking the toy box on the last day of term. Ultra Combo Double reinforces that feeling, letting players take both Ultras at the cost of damage output. It's a boon for grapplers, who once had to choose between a ground-based Ultra and an anti-air one, but others benefit as well. Ken can take both his powerful Shinryuken and the anti-fireball Guren Senpukyaku, for instance. It's a welcome addition to Arcade mode, too, where the inability to select the best Ultra for each match-up has always felt punitive, but it's hard to recommend a mode where opponents can read your inputs, teaching you nothing and breeding bad habits. Online is, as ever, the place to be.

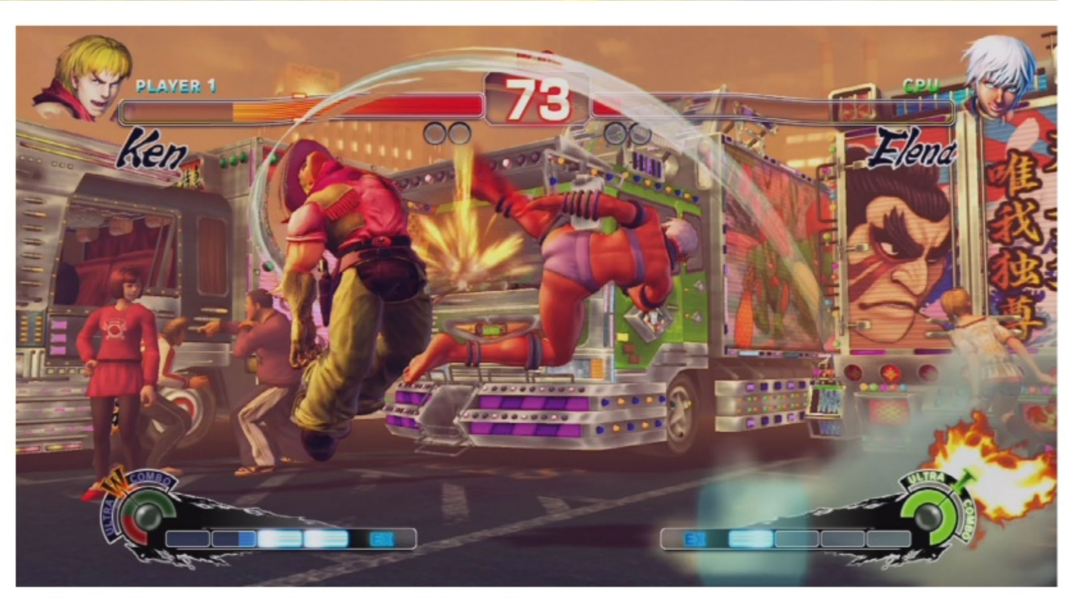
There are changes here, too. A new Team Battle mode replicates the tournament scene's popular three-versus-three, winner-stays-on format. Online Training enables two warriors to experiment without tiresome dips into the pause menu to tweak AI dummy settings. ▶





ABOVE **Almost six years after its arcade debut, this is still a handsome production. The forthcoming PC release will support 1080p, but this is a game whose visual power lies in its art direction, not in pixel counts**





TOP **Those with a *Street Fighter X Tekken* save file on their machine can access variant costumes for the new fighters in *Ultra*. Here's Rolento in janitor garb, swapping out his army baton for a plunger.**
MAIN **Capcom has made hundreds of granular changes to the cast. Rufus's EX Messiah Kick no longer goes over crouching foes, Cody picks up his knife mid-combo, and many tweaks have lifted T Hawk from the bottom of the tier list.**
RIGHT ***Street Fighter X Tekken*'s Pit Stop 109 stage was detested by many thanks to its happy hardcore theme. It, like other imports, has been tweaked to fit the art style, but the music hasn't survived**

And replays can now be uploaded in HD, meaning we'll never again darken our YouTube channel with shaky phone recordings of our finest moments. Yet matches themselves are confusing at the time of writing, full of old hands learning new systems, while a leaderboard reset has thrown A-rank killers in with the beginners.

Players are also learning five new characters, four of which have, like the game's half-dozen new stages, been brought across from *Street Fighter X Tekken*. It's a smart, if cynical, way of making the most of the asset library from a game whose player count quickly fell off a cliff. The most striking is Hugo, a German wrestler of such vast form that he obscures the health bars at the top of the screen and whose Arcade mode cinematic explains that he is fighting the world's greatest warriors because of something to do with potatoes. He's more mobile than the average grappler, with a running lariat, an anti-air grab with tremendous priority and limbs of such length that he can hit you from two-thirds of a screen away if you stick out an attack at the wrong time.

His *Final Fight* accomplice, Poison, has a flexible toolset for those prepared to look past one of Capcom's more cringeworthy and lascivious character designs. Her generous special move list includes riffs on Ryu's fireball and dragon punch, Fei Long's Rekkaken, and Adon's Jaguar Kick, the last of which can be used to start combos. Meanwhile, Elena, who debuted in *Street Fighter III: Third Strike*, is unwieldy at first thanks to her floaty jump and a curious normal moveset, where even punch buttons perform kicks. But that's capoeira for you, and with legs as long as hers, we'd use them a lot too. She's devastating in the corner, where she has several ways to combo into one of her Ultras. Rolento is mercifully far less powerful than he was in *Street Fighter X Tekken*, although an Ultra setup off a single EX attack is not to be sniffed at. And the jury is still very much out on the fifth character, Decapre, a reskinned Cammy whose moves are performed with charge motions instead of quarter circles and only suffers in comparison to her powerful doppelganger.

Getting to grips with these new characters is harder than it should be, given there are no combo trials, which gave invaluable insight into a fighter's tools and setups in the series' previous games. Capcom says they're on the way, but they're a frustrating omission. In the meantime, at least there's the Internet. Forums and video sites are already teeming with the discoveries of one of the most scientific communities in videogames.

And therein lies quite the caveat. Capcom has seemingly fixed *Super SFIV*'s problems, but those problems were first discovered by the very same community that may also eventually break *Ultra SFIV*. Only time will tell what cracks lie beneath the surface. In the meantime, however, it's impossible not to admire the elegance with which Capcom has tackled some complex systemic challenges, and the effect its solutions have had on the way the game feels. *Ultra SFIV* is a slower, more deliberate game, one in which success isn't solely about putting your opponent into a succession of 50/50 decisions. There is also a renewed focus on the fighting game fundamentals: space control and the psychology of competition. It feels, in other words, an awful lot like classic *Street Fighter*, and praise doesn't come much higher than that.

9



TECH AND MIX

One of *Street Fighter*'s most advanced techniques is the option select: players perform two commands at once, with the performed move changing according to what the opponent does. Japanese players developed the option select throw tech, performed by tapping back on the joystick and pressing all four light and medium attack buttons. If the opponent goes for a throw, the game recognises the press of light punch and kick, and counters. If they attack, the medium inputs will Focus absorb the blow, with the joystick motion then back-dashing to safety. The Red Focus input of light punch, medium punch and medium kick is intended to stop this technique: in early location tests, light punch could be replaced with any button.

ABOVE Hugo doesn't need the pint-sized Yun to look like a monster; he even looks massive next to Zangief. He's tremendously powerful, but struggles in certain match-ups. You'll soon wince at the sight of Gouken

Post Script

Peter Rosas, designer

Until 2012, **Peter 'The ComboFiend' Rosas** was just another *Street Fighter* tournament player. But when Seth Killian left Capcom, Rosas stepped in as community manager. He was given a dual brief: communicating both with seasoned fighting game players and a wider audience. *Ultra Street Fighter IV*'s community focus meant his role evolved first into collating player feedback, and then into development of the battle system and character balance, leading to a design credit on the final game. Here, he reflects on a very modern development process and the perils of trying to please all of the people all of the time.



What was your approach to rebalancing characters?
I know that there are tools that every character has to succeed. It's just that some characters have more tools than others, and the ones that have the most generally do the best. So we tried to give characters more options. In the beginning, I went too hard in that direction. I gave them some really strong things. You're trying to appeal to everybody. At the first location test, all the characters were just obnoxious. I gave everybody what they wanted and conservative players were at a loss, because characters were generally overpowered. And those that were overpowered [in *Super Street Fighter IV: Arcade Edition*], a lot of people clamoured for them to be weakened, so we did that as well.

When did you realise that you'd gone too far?
Certain high-level players whose characters were deemed weak in the previous iteration would come up to me and be like, "Peter, I just feel like my character is too strong. I'm so sorry that I asked for all these buffs, because the character's too good and I don't want to win this easily. It's boring."

And how did you ultimately strike the right balance?
I tried to dial them back, but using the initial requests as a baseline. When something was truly obnoxious, we took it away. If it was beneficial to the character, but was implemented in a very strong manner, then we [toned it down] so they had new tools that weren't overpowered but were useful and necessary.

One of the more controversial changes was Dhalsim's two-hit medium kick, a huge help to his keepaway style, which you put in and then took out.
You have these characters that people have been playing, then you show them new changes and they're like, "OK, I haven't played with it yet. I don't know how strong it is. I'm just watching videos." Then it's taken away before they can play with it and suddenly they feel like they're entitled to it. We were trying something out – it was deemed for the greater good of the game that the character shouldn't have it. Dhalsim players told us that he has a hard time fighting opponents when they get in close. That medium kick only made his good match-ups better; it didn't address the different issues that Dhalsim players wanted to see addressed.

"If you make the proper read, you should be rewarded. That's definitely still here; it's just the reads are a lot harder"



The pace of *Ultra* feels slower. Is that the intent, or will things pick up once players adjust to it?
The game definitely has a little bit of a slower approach, in that when you knock the opponent down, it isn't an automatic win [because of Delayed Standing]. What players were experiencing was that one knockdown equalled a big burst of damage they couldn't stop. So even though the pacing was the same, if I swept you once with Akuma, the match was over. Now if I sweep you with Akuma, I don't get that easy victory unless I take into account Delayed Standing.

I'm not seeing, as yet, players really understanding how to use the new tools given to them. But that's fine; the game just came out. I was watching Wednesday Night Fights and one player was adjusting his jump-ins based on if he thought the opponent would use Delayed Standing or not. If you make the proper read in *Street Fighter*, you should be rewarded. That's definitely still here; it's just that the reads are a lot harder and they're all 50/50 instead of 100 per cent in your favour.

Why did you launch a non-final build of the game in Japanese arcades in April?
We wanted to get the game out, and had every intention of it being the final build, but the feedback we were getting was that some things seemed a little off. At the location tests out here in the US, everyone had three days or so to play, and you can only collect so much feedback in that time. But the Japanese players were really going in on the game, and the feedback we were getting led us to believe that a few things were needed to bring the game to that shine Capcom is known for.

As a former tournament player, do you fear that head start means Japanese players will have an advantage over westerners at the Evolution Championships?
I don't think so. With YouTube and live streams, those guys are showing off everything they can do. If you see everything, the second you get [the game], you go into Practice mode and go nuts. In Japanese arcades, they don't have that; they're spending a dollar a game to play. With a dollar on the line, you're not going to try fun stuff. If a player is really good, he's playing to win and only practising serious stuff; he's not exploring the character... American players can sit in Practice mode, learn new tricks, and keep them to themselves. ■

Murdered: Soul Suspect

Publisher Square Enix
Developer In-house, Airtight Games
Format 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One (version tested)
Release Out now

We're an alley cat, and we're stuck in an alley. More specifically, we're the ghost of a police detective possessing the body of a cat, but that doesn't make the head-height fences barring our progress any less baffling. Our feline ride is only in this area to let us climb two scaffolding towers for collectibles, auto-jumping from beam to beam. Back on ground level, though, this fence is apparently impassible. Frustrated, we hit Y to meow in protest, then revert to the incorporeal form of Ronan O'Connor and stroll through the fence and back onto the ugly streets of Salem, Massachusetts.

Videogame logic is often criticised, but it's a perfect encapsulation of the problem with Airtight's 3D detective thriller: it's so restrictive. You'll butt up against its limitations in the copious impassible 'consecrated' and spectral obstacles of Salem, which hem you onto the critical path; in a whodunnit story that's more interested in telling you what happens than freeing you to deduce anything; and when you're granted a teleportation power that's used almost solely to allow a ghost – a *ghost* – to pass through gaps in walls or make short jumps.

Still, detective games often rely on tight plotting to make up for reduced agency, and *Murdered*'s mashup of cop and ghost stories has the potential to intrigue. A serial killer is on the loose in Salem and the police are baffled, labelling him the Bell Killer after his distinctive mark. We learn this early on through the eyes of O'Connor, a chain-smoking cop with a murky past. The story begins with a lone arrest attempt that culminates in O'Connor being hurled from a four-storey building and then pumped with bullets. If he wants to escape the limbo he's thrust into and join his wife, Julia, in the afterlife, he'll have to solve one last case: his own murder.

It's an ugly state of affairs, and we're not just talking about the killings. *Murdered*'s bland, grey-blue Salem is a town of patchy texture work and interchangeable citizens that share a meagre handful of cartoony faces. More shocking are the technical issues: the game drops frames on Xbox One like a clumsy glazier, the camera can't handle tight spaces and lets you stumble blindly into rooms and into danger, cutscenes trigger out of sequence, and ghostly sidequest NPCs respawn after you've helped them pass into the great beyond. Most irritating, however, are the times when the all-pervading button prompts fail to arrive; it irks when you're caught during a stealth section due to an absent QTE cue.

Such shonkiness might have been redeemed had *Murdered* known what to make of its interactive format, but it doesn't. Your hunt for the killer's identity will take you to a variety of horror cliché settings, as well as a hub of Salem streets, but each is full of the same dreary activities. Investigations make up the bulk of your casework: 3D hidden-object zones where the developers are afraid to hide the objects, labelling them not only with prompts when you stand nearby but often with crime scene paraphernalia too. Psychic residues, descriptive challenges and O'Connor's ability to possess specific people and influence their thoughts are sprinkled lightly on top, but the foremost adds nothing more than button presses, while the latter two are by turns insultingly trivial and confusingly illogical.

It's a whodunnit story that's more interested in telling you what happens than freeing you to deduce anything



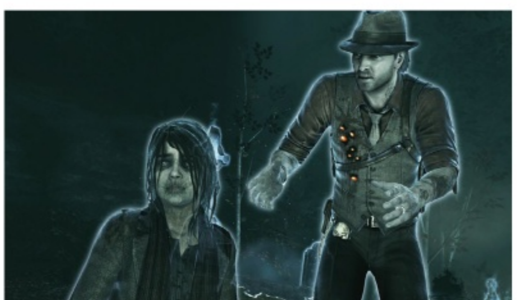
Investigations wrap up with a test. All the evidence you've found is laid out and you must answer the question of the moment – Where's the girl's body? What was my killer doing? – by picking out up to three of the most relevant bits. Usually, you'll have been explicitly told the answer, and so the only modicum of challenge is in deciphering the occasionally obtuse logic of what to place in the slots.

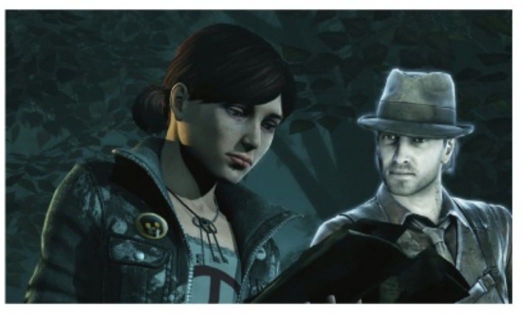
Between investigations, there's a numbing barrage of collectibles to harvest, and you'll have to avoid the poorly explained demonic forces that haunt this twilight limbo. Yet stealth has little meaning in a world where you have X-ray vision and the power to walk though interior walls, while demons sashay along tightly scripted paths and are unaware of anything not in their direct line of sight. Get behind a demon and you can even terminate it with a quick QTE, turning a potentially terrifying interstitial between casework into a faintly amusing hunt as you stalk your unwitting prey from the next room across.

It all goes to hell if you do get spotted, however. You'll die quickly in the open, so Airtight has filled Salem with aura 'hiding spots'. Oddly, many are redundant and it only ever puts a few where you need them, while the dim-witted demons become hide-and-seek experts once aggroed from their scripted routes. In the end, we'd mash RT to leap between a cluster of two or three spots to avoid being found until the demons blinked back to their routines.

With so little systemic support, *Murdered* puts all its emphasis on its story, which just can't bear the weight. The writing aims for hardboiled horror – Dick Tracy by way of Paranormal Activity – but feels undercooked. O'Connor spouts trite observations full of false import. The ghost writing that accompanies clues rarely has anything to say ("Troubled" floats by a scribble on a mental-asylum wall), and the ending is an anticlimax, spitting on any connections you've bothered to make and mechanically relying on a baseless leap of logic under time pressure. On every level, then, *Murdered* throttles its premise. Given the promise offered by a 3D spin on *Ghost Trick*, Airtight's game feels dead on arrival.

4





LEFT O'Connor has a young medium partner called Joy, a lively foil to his easy competence and direct manner. Using your poltergeist powers to help her slip through an area unnoticed is a smart concept, but ruined by formulaic execution

TOP Demonic pits block O'Connor's path, but humans can stroll by unhindered. Like so much here, their potential is squandered. When the script doesn't just bypass them automatically, a human to distract, possess and ride over trouble is never more than a few feet away. **ABOVE** O'Connor is, despite a gruff demeanour, likeable. His story even has a few moving moments, but it's bloated by meaningless hardbitten pronouncements and busywork



ABOVE Moggies carry you through vents and ducts, and awkwardly climb vines. They are invariably black, as befits a town steeped in witch hunting history ▶



You can work out ***Murdered***'s plot fairly early on, but you'll have to guide O'Connor through the painstaking process anyway

Post Script

Autopsying the cold corpse of the detective videogame

We don't often look to mainstream videogames for the quality of their writing, but they have found their niche in action-driven templates, even if a game such as *The Last Of Us* is only bold enough to explore its character dynamics amid a cacophony of shotgun blasts. Read the reactions to *Murdered*'s critical mauling and there's evidence of fatigue for this form of storytelling. Why be so down on a game trying to do something new?

The problem isn't the message, it's the medium. The detective fantasy implicitly promises much that the structures bred by years of shooter iteration are ill-evolved to deliver. Yes, *Murdered* tries a new-ish remix of a defined tale and freedom of movement, but opening up the world and emptying it of the usual distractions only emphasises how bound you are to passively absorbing its tale.

You don't need to be Poirot to figure out why the same old activities dominate game fiction, either. In an industry that increasingly differentiates itself through providing agency, there has to be something meaningful to do. That doesn't mean just the power to act, but to perform actions with consequences in each virtual world. Overcoming a bad guy or making it to a waypoint are among the simplest expressions of meaningful agency, because these are binary states. There's no room for ambiguity, so you can flip the switch and have the next cutscene alter the world, translating action into reaction.

That's also why detective fiction is so hard to make into a satisfying modern videogame: there are no such easy get-outs. If you examine a clue, most of the changes of state ought to go on in your head, not onscreen. Likewise, if you interrogate a suspect, you want more control than pressing a button and hoping the summary text near it equates to the query and the tone you wanted. Unless developers ruin the mystery by presenting solutions, true certainty comes mostly in the final revelation, but scripted story beats are much harder to present when you can't be sure of where the player's reasoning is up to.

In short, deduction is the bedrock of any detective roleplay, but in an era of mass accessibility and limited AI, developers can't rely on you making the correct connections yourself, give you the freedom to question as you like, nor model well-realised story paths for every possible investigative tack. The result is minimal control, minimal room for deduction and disappointment.

Other detective games work by either embracing their nature as predetermined stories or masking their lack of plot agency with other activities. Cult classic *Ghost Trick*, for instance, is ostensibly driven by a murder, but asks you to figure out Rube Goldberg-esque chains of object interaction, not the mystery at hand. Jon Ingold's *Make It Good*, meanwhile, is unabashedly interactive fiction. It is the kind of choose your own adventure that would be too confusing and complex for a book to contain, but every page is written, and every response mapped out. *LA Noire* is a fusion of both approaches, couching its scripted story in gun battles and driving.

If detective videogames are to advance beyond bolt-on brain work, they'll eventually need to be able to model the one thing all detective stories are predicated on: human nature. And there is hope. *Versu*, *Façade* and *Prom Week* all offer glimpses of systems complex enough to offer at least the illusion of nuanced human response. But to succeed, a freeform detective game mostly just requires the bravery to let the player figure things out. Perhaps the genre's great hope, then, is *The Vanishing Of Ethan Carter*, with developer The Astronauts determined to strip away all handholding. *Murdered*'s advocates clearly want a modern realisation of interactive crime fiction, but getting there will be more than a case of transplanting a mystery story into a 3D engine and turning on noclip. ■


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WildStar

WildStar is comfortable being an MMOG. It's strange that this is remarkable, and that it should be a cause for celebration when a new game in a popular genre seems happy to be what it is. But the recent history of the MMOG is a story of games caught between audiences, brands and genres. *WildStar* ignores all that and sets out its stall deep within the territory established by Blizzard a decade ago. Perhaps that's not surprising: developer Carbine was founded by 17 members of the original *World Of Warcraft* team.

Carbine has got as close as anybody to recapturing the feeling of early *WOW*, and while *WildStar* is unlikely to be epochal in the same way, it comes strongly recommended to anybody who has ever been captured by this particular arrangement of questing, RPG theory, exploration and strategy. *WildStar* is a comprehensive retooling of what made this genre great, paired with an eye for style and a strong sense of fun.

It's set on Nexus, a legendary planet rediscovered by a band of refugees called the Exiles. Nexus was home to the Eldan, a galaxy-conquering progenitor race that has since vanished, but not before littering the planet with technology. In Nexus, the Exiles see an opportunity to claim a new home as well as the weapons needed to fight off the forces set against them – specifically, a militaristic empire called the Dominion. The Dominion was founded by the Eldan before they disappeared, and believes that it has a religious right to claim the planet for itself. Every character belongs to one of these two factions, and each side sports a separate set of alien races with humans as common middle ground.

This isn't hard sci-fi. *WildStar*'s look and feel borrow a little from Star Wars and a lot from both *Ratchet & Clank* and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Its alien world is rendered in deep purple, teal, orange and neon green. Its characters are tuned for expressiveness, moving and jumping and fighting with a degree of flair and personality that demonstrates a real understanding of what makes a cartoon character pop from the screen.

These qualities are reflected elsewhere. Loot, for example, doesn't wait to be collected. When a monster dies, it explodes in a shower of giblets and collectibles that bounce off into the surrounding area before being hoovered into your character with an audible whoosh. Score a double or triple kill on a mob of enemies and the game's announcer will bellow his approval in the tradition of *Unreal Tournament*; he even screams, "Holy *bleep*, you levelled up" when you progress to level two.

WildStar's liveliness plays a key role in making the game accessible and attractive to newcomers, but it also belies its depth. While it's possible to progress alone – and there's plenty to do if you choose to play that way – group encounters, raids and challenging instances are introduced early and accompany the experience all the way to level 50 and beyond. This is the most demanding MMOG we've played in years, its difficulty compounded by a combat system that places heavy emphasis on movement and positioning alongside a precipitously deep gear and upgrade system.

Combat is almost entirely based on area-of-effect attacks that project from your character and from enemies in cones, lines and circles. Each class manages the system differently: frontline Warriors are able to survive a few blows if it means staying in melee range, while Spellslingers deal huge damage but desperately need to stay out of the enemy's reach. Advanced play means chaining together 'rotations' – efficient runs of spells and abilities – while moving, dodging, watching your periphery and managing your resources.

This focus on area-of-effect abilities works well in PvP combat. The Spellslinger's Flash Freeze power, for example, roots any enemies in a broad cone in front of the caster. Against monsters, you'll use it to kite or to escape from fights you can't win; against players, hitting a group when they're clumped together sets them up for devastating attacks from the rest of your team. *WildStar*'s PvP borrows more than a little from MOBAs in that any given ability can be deployed skilfully or unskilfully, expressing the personality and talent of the player behind the controls.

Monster enemies possess their own attack patterns and these become increasingly elaborate. Bosses create mazes with their projectiles and force reactions from players. While the healer-damage-tank system is deeply familiar, *WildStar*'s new ideas recalibrate the way the system functions, and raids in particular demand a degree of dexterity and coordination that goes beyond what has been done in the genre before.

The game's biggest weakness is that it doesn't work very hard to introduce these ideas to a new audience. It makes a strong statement for the value and legitimacy of a type of game that has been exploited and derided for years, but it relies on familiarity with the genre to crack through the layer of mechanical noise that is introduced after its breezy introduction. This issue is exacerbated by a UI that sags under the weight of all the types of information that it has to present. Player-made addons can alleviate the worst problems, but using them requires a degree of technical nous beginners may not have. *WildStar* also demands a subscription fee, a model that might fly with the MMOG-savvy players it targets, but that's being challenged by free rivals.

For your money, however, this is the best new MMOG since *Guild Wars 2* and arguably the most feature complete an MMOG has ever been on launch. Raids, PvP, housing, dungeons and so on may all be familiar concepts, but it's been a long time since they've been presented this comprehensively, and with this much charm, on day one.

8

Publisher/developer NCSOFT (Carbine Studios)
Format PC
Release Out now

WildStar's PvP borrows more than a little from MOBAs in that any ability can be deployed skilfully or unskilfully





LEFT PvP combat can be hectic, but developing your understanding of the game's systems reveals tactical depth. Interface addons focus the experience on competitive play. BELOW Mounts include rideable animals, hoverboards and sci-fi vehicles, with distinct animations and customisation options. Mounts also give you extra options in the game's many jumping puzzles. MAIN Cutscenes are used sparingly to highlight certain characters and introduce new conflicts. *WildStar* has a much lighter touch than other recent MMOGs when it comes to narrative – it's all about quick vignettes before returning to the action



ABOVE Decorating your house isn't just a cosmetic concern – it affects how much 'rested' experience you bank while you're logged out. Rare housing items and constructable buildings can sell for a great deal of money





Grid: Autosport

We're in the middle of the pack on the second lap of a touring car race when something other than our shunt-happy opponents hits us: this feels like *TOCA* again. With its continual reinvention of cherished series, Codemasters has been nothing if not brave, but the UK studio has returned to its roots for *Autosport*, stripping away the glitzy distractions of its recent releases in the process.

The pared-down design starts with the front-end, which dispenses with Codemasters' usual interface flair and sticks with simple, clean (and fast-loading) menus set against a black background. There's no garage, no collection of cars to accrue (unless you count the custom setups you can define for online racing), and no narrative – rather than focusing on your own racing team, you are simply a driver choosing which team offer to accept each season.

It's a shock of clarity that will prove as divisive as *Grid 2*'s swerve into bombastic arcade territory, but anyone hankering for management elements should feel adequately compensated once they get out on the track. Codemasters has gone all out to address the criticisms levelled at *Grid 2* by players disappointed with the game's attempt at appealing to a broader audience, and created something rare: a racing game in which you actually have to *race*.

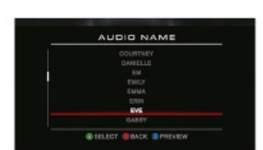
Leave the difficulty on its default Medium setting and you'll find yourself up against uncommonly challenging opponents. Reaching the front of the pack is a Herculean effort as cars shunt and weave, defend their line and constantly look for opportunities to pass you. It makes qualifying (on the events where it's available) a genuinely worthwhile endeavour, and even once you do make it to first position, the pressure never lets up. It's telling that the lowest difficulty feels most like other racers, allowing you to thread through 16 positions over the course of three laps with little resistance; switch things up to Very Hard, however, and you can spend a whole race exchanging 13th and 14th positions with another car.

Crucially, *Autosport*'s career structure and nuanced vehicle handling combine to alleviate any potential frustration for players weaned on effortless victories. The career is split into five disciplines: Touring, Endurance, Open Wheel, Tuner and Street. Taking part in an event will earn you XP in that particular discipline's strand, and larger *Grid* tournaments become available once you've reached a certain level in all five.

XP is earned in several ways: Team Targets ask for a minimum finishing position in the Team Championships (but you'll only lose XP, not progress, if you miss this); Team Bonuses offer secondary objectives such as a finishing position in the Drivers' Championship or finishing ahead of a particular driver; Sponsor Objectives offer smaller amounts of XP for,

Publisher/developer Codemasters
Format 360, PC, PS3
Release Out now

Codemasters has returned to its roots for Autosport, stripping away the glitzy distractions of recent releases in the process



RACE AND GENDER
Given the furore at E3 over the lack of playable female co-op characters in *Assassin's Creed Unity* and *Far Cry 4*, Codemasters chose the right time to rectify that other big omission from *Grid 2*: the option to have your pit crew address you as a woman. Whether you'll spend much time enjoying it is another matter, however, as their vocabulary is so limited you'll often hear the same comment several times during a race. You can, at least, gain useful information on your car's state, teammate's and rivals' positions, and split times using the D-pad.

say, driving above 120mph for three minutes in total or improving on your previous lap time during a race; and finally Discipline Rewards award you for your finishing position, beating your rival, posting the fastest lap and any bonus earned from racing without driving aids or limiting yourself to an in-car view.

Yes, *Grid 2*'s most contentious absence, cockpit cam, has been rectified, and you can now choose between dash and driver perspectives. The dashboard itself is made up of textures seemingly ripped directly from the PS1 era, but they're disguised by a pronounced depth-of-field effect that blurs the interior and focuses you on the road. It will look ugly to bystanders, but the effect is pleasing if you're in the driving seat.

The same goes for your sense of connection with the road. *Autosport* has been built from the wheels up, boasting a complex grip model that underpins handling which, while still approachable, offers considerable depth. Traction is paramount in *Autosport*, and knowing when to break it and when to maximise your power transfer is key to moving your way up the grid. The weighty cars are prone to understeer, but rather than insisting on a powerslide to correct, they realistically respond to your throttle and braking inputs, making every honed cornering manoeuvre feel balletic. You can still get sideways, of course, but it's rarely your fastest option outside of street races. Together with your opponents' AI, such lively feedback makes for an intense, and satisfying, drive.

That boisterous AI does throw up some of its own problems, however. While opponents are noticeably less aggressive in open-wheeled races compared with touring and street events, they don't always concede in the same way a human driver might, sticking to their chosen route even though you legitimately out-braked them into a corner. It's less of a problem once the pack has spread out a little, but in a game that asks so much of you it can be frustrating to have your skilful manoeuvre met with apparent obliviousness – especially when some Sponsor Objectives ask you to complete a race with no collisions. Adjust for this, though, and the sense of speed and danger more than makes up for the occasional duff AI decision.

Codemasters has painstakingly tuned its flagship series, reducing weight by stripping it of unnecessary luxuries, and created a leaner, race-focused machine. While it can't compete with the fidelity or detail of *Gran Turismo 5*, *Grid: Autosport* instead uses broad strokes to create a vivid impression of what it's actually like to be bumper-to-bumper at 140mph as a hairpin comes into view. It is ironic, then, that for all Codemasters' attempts to make the player feel like a race driver by building up a fiction around them, it is *Autosport*'s barebones, abstract interpretation of a driving career that proves its most successful.

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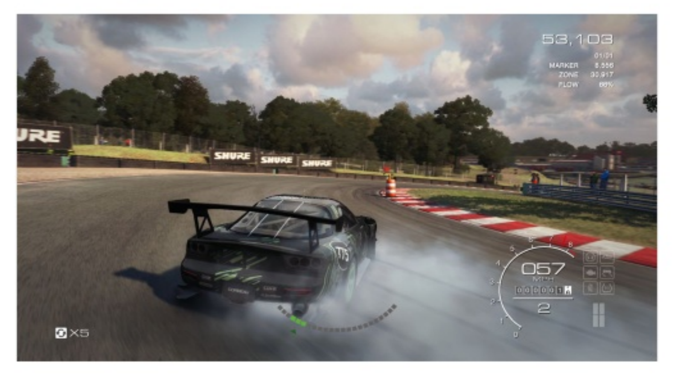
ABOVE *Autosport*'s damage modelling is a triumph, with even the slightest bump sullying the sheen of your car. You can ask your teammate to be more aggressive or defensive using L1 or R1.
LEFT The return of the in-car view will please players who take their racing games seriously. Violent camera movements makes the game feel alarmingly fast, too



BELOW Drift events feel less Japan-centric now thanks to the fact that they mostly take place on short circuits. Drift-tuned cars are jumpy, but once tamed they allow for indulgently serpentine driving lines



ABOVE Endurance racing takes place at night and requires you do drive for a set amount of time while carefully managing tyre wear. Break traction too often and you won't be as fast in the final minutes of the race



Blade Symphony

Publisher/developer Puny Human
Format PC
Release Out now

B*lade Symphony* is about the fantasy of being a swordsman and all that comes with it: honour, skill and etiquette. If you're responsive to those ideas to even a small degree, it is a fighting game with tremendous depth and promise. It's a realisation of its core fantasy that's original enough in its execution to stand up as a competitive game in its own right.

It's also proof the fighting genre has an alternative PC history, one with its origins in modding and indie development rather than the arcade. *Blade Symphony* is a direct successor to the *Jedi Knight* series and the scene that grew around online lightsaber duelling. Others have come down the same path since – *Chivalry* and *Lugaru*, for instance – but *Blade Symphony* is the first to capture the social spirit of *Jedi Knight*'s duelling servers.

Like its predecessor, *Blade Symphony* is structured around one-on-one duels. Two players armed with swords face each other in a 3D arena with full freedom of movement. The game is designed to be controlled with a mouse and keyboard, and attacking is linked to a single button press. Switching between three ground stances, charging attacks, changing direction and jumping means that your attack can be modified in dozens of ways, depending on your character.

There are four fighters, each representing a different style of swordfighting. Phalanx is a fencer. His light attacks are jabbing thrusts and his weakness is the relative simplicity of his movement. Contrast that with Pure, a whirling wushu fighter whose aerial power and radial attack patterns are hard to read and even harder to parry. Judgement is styled like a samurai and has the most powerful heavy attacks of all; Ryoku specialises in fast, direct attacks followed by evasive manoeuvres.

A character's moveset is presented as a grid at the bottom of the screen, with vertical rows representing stances – fast, balanced, heavy and air – and the horizontal representing progression along each combo track. By switching up and down through stances, any given combo can navigate a freeform path across the grid as the situation dictates. Certain combinations are more effective than others, and these are the ones you'll need to memorise, but by and large the system is less didactic than fighting game players will be used to. The emphasis here is on-the-fly problem solving, on doing things your opponent won't have seen before, and on being acutely aware of your position in 3D space.

A blade's position is calculated precisely, and where and how powerfully an attack connects affects how much damage is done. Longswords and scimitars can adopt a general blocking stance, but otherwise parries need to be exact to register. To help with this, your next attack is telegraphed ahead of you as a holographic blade path that only you can see. This helps to ensure that you know exactly what your sword is going to do when you click. Facing a charging Pure as Phalanx, for example, you might step to the side at the last second and parry with a balanced sideways swing. Providing your blades connect, or you succeed in hit-stunning your opponent, you can then transition into a charged lunge in the fast stance, leaping in to strike and back to get yourself out of range. This pattern of attack, counterattack and evasion sets the game's rhythm – extended clashes are almost always lethal for one party.

The emphasis here is on-the-fly problem solving, on doing things your opponent won't have seen before

The swords themselves further complicate this already complex system. You pick a blade type (and a cosmetic style) independent of your character, and it's the relationship between the two that defines exactly how you'll go about trying to win. Longswords can block and do more damage when they laterally bisect an opponent. Rapiers are effective at parrying and are lethal when combined with forward attacks. Katanas can't block, but can feint out of attacks and do double damage after a parry. The Chinese jian can intercept even heavy attacks. Simitars offer lower base damage, but the amount of pain they inflict doesn't decrease over the course of a multiple-hit attack.

Resolving all of these interlocking systems is the game's chief challenge, and the normal tutorial can only give you a grounding in the basics. It's possible to download a more comprehensive version from the Steam Workshop, but even so the learning curve is severe. Climbing it, however, is aided by the game's excellent online structure. In free-for-all mode, players hang out in multiroom dojos, challenging each other to duels. When a bout begins, other players turn into outlines and can't interfere with the fight, but they can watch from the sidelines and often do. Failure in this mode isn't punished, so new players can challenge whoever they like without fear of losing their rating.

The game uses an Elo system to determine a player's rank. Unlike other online games, where you gain experience and progress through fixed tiers, your rating in *Blade Symphony* is based on your skill relative to the rest of the playerbase. Whichever percentile you fall into determines your league – from Oak to Master – and you can only gain or lose rating by duelling people in the same league on a ranked duelling server, where players queue for matches in walled-off arenas.

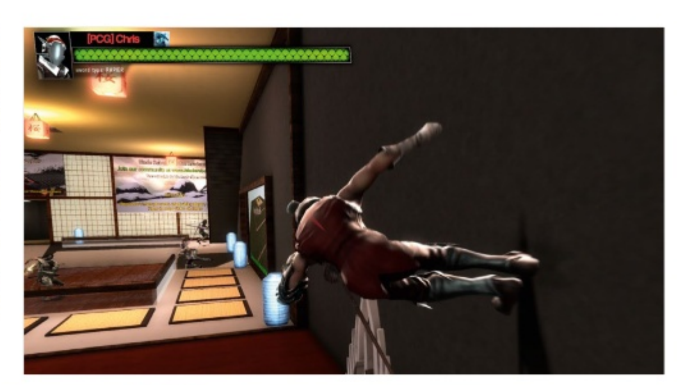
Ranked duels have an extraordinary sense of personality and carry significant weight, particularly between high-ranking players. The community is small, so you're likely to see the same people a lot. Rivalries form naturally, and the community maintains a culture of etiquette. It is considered good manners, for example, to use a bow emote before a duel. It's the combination of this collective roleplay with direct competition that makes the game so compulsive. As such, *Blade Symphony* is as close as you are likely to get to the fantasy of slowly becoming a master swordsman.

8



FRESH FORGED
Steam Workshop integration is used extensively to include player-made content in the game. This includes cosmetic items – masks and swords, which every player can see without having to download them first – and custom maps. There are adaptations from other media, such as *Kingdom Hearts*' keyblade, a lightsaber, and even Sly Cooper's cane. You can also wear Majora's Mask or fight with half a pair of scissors. Player content can cause visual glitches or clutter the game's look, but it ensures a degree of personality that fits well with these characterful duels.





ABOVE Training against the AI is a good way to become familiar with the basic attack chains, but it's only able to take you so far. You'll eventually need to step into the competitive arena in order to advance your abilities





TOP Open duelling lobbies are the heart of the community. Watching high-rank players spar can teach you a lot about the metagame, including tactics to watch out for. MAIN Eventually, it gets much easier to read the particle effects to determine what they signify, but the game can still be a little visually messy from time to time. LEFT It's polite to bow at the beginning of a duel – just press B. Attacking or throwing something at your opponent at this moment is considered very bad manners

Among The Sleep

Having wandered the corridors of so many haunted asylums of late, encountering *Among The Sleep*'s fresh take on videogame horror comes as something of a relief. You spend your time moving between a surreal imagined world and a suburban house, both equally unfamiliar thanks to Krillbite Studio's masterstroke: casting you as a two-year-old child.

Appropriately, the fastest way to get around is to crawl. You can walk or run, but attempting to sustain the latter for long will see you topple onto all fours. It's also possible to grab, drag or throw objects, which feel suitably heavy for a toddler. Looking down at your feet or catching sight of your shadow – all steadying arms and precarious gait – is a continual delight.

You're accompanied throughout by Teddy, a gift received on your second birthday that has come to life. He spends most of the time riding on your back, guiding the way, but glows when hugged to light up dark areas. His nervous narration adds another layer of unease, while his children's-TV-presenter intonation and unblinking, sewed-on eyes lend him the air of a vicarious arsonist encouraging you to light the match.

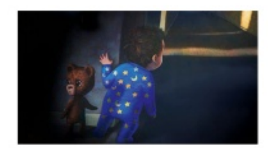
Among The Sleep mixes exploration with simple physical puzzle solving – finding several toy owls to weigh down a see-saw so you can reach a platform, for example – as you search for your mother, who disappeared on the evening of your birthday. To find her, you must first hunt down trinkets that represent a shared memory. Each is hidden in its own nightmarish land populated by distortions of the familiar – such as a memorable bureau with Dalí-esque spindly legs – and your stature makes everything loom threateningly large.

Each foray into these worlds is made all the more oppressive by the background noise of echoing lullabies and crying children, and a mysterious creature patrols some areas, too. Playing on childhood fears, it must be avoided by hiding under furniture or in cupboards, but poses no real threat so long as you are careful. A sequence later on, however, in which you must avoid toppling towers of play bricks so as not to alert it to your position, proves exceptionally tense.

Among The Sleep is certainly unnerving, but playing as a toddler gives you licence to be bold; a two-year-old wouldn't be scared of venturing into the basement, so why should you be? It's a curious effect, but one put into context later on when what appears to be a tale of supernatural abduction turns out to be something altogether more horrifying. The revelatory finale will leave you winded, but also heartened by Krillbite's assertion that firstperson horror needn't be confined by crumbling walls and straitjackets.



Publisher/developer Krillbite Studio
Format PC (version tested), PS4
Release Out now (PS4 TBA)



KNEE HIGH

As befits a game starring a toddler, *Among The Sleep*'s world is a confusing place. Book covers are illustrated with indistinct blurs of colour and symbols, while objects are so large, contained within such dark spaces, that it's hard to get a sense of the lie of the land. The scale is more pronounced via Oculus Rift, but we often struggled to trigger the hand icon that lets you to interact with objects, and gained a deeper understanding of why toddlers throw up so often.



This playground is the first area beyond the house you'll visit and, although rather pleasant on arrival, a dark presence soon saps its welcoming nature. At least you can take a break from looking for an escape and ride the slide

Ace Combat Infinity

Countries spend millions keeping their air forces in the sky. Fuel is expensive, after all. With *Ace Combat Infinity* – the 17th instalment in Bandai Namco's flight series, but its first sortie into free-to-play – Project Aces has managed to simulate that burden. Every time you take to the skies, whether it's part of the campaign or series-first competitive team missions, a unit of fuel is consumed. You're given three to start with, and can earn more by completing challenges, but run out and you'll have to stump up 79p or wait four hours for another unit to generate.

You can partially bypass this by spending £11.99 on a solo campaign pass that will enable you to fly eight singleplayer missions without buying fuel. But only five short levels are available now and you'll still have to spend fuel to fly online. Plus, thanks to Bandai Namco's abandonment of *Assault Horizon*'s filmic innovations – Dogfight Mode is gone in favour of more traditional encounters – what is here feels undernourished in comparison to a 2011 game. Dogfight Mode might have been divisive, but it was rousing and did a far better job of communicating the drama of air combat than shooting at fast-moving dots. Bombing runs and gunship missions are also nowhere to be seen.

Publisher/developer Bandai Namco (Project Aces)
Format PS3
Release Out now



FUEL SHORTAGE
Infinity's fuel comes in two flavours: Supplied and Stocked. Supplied replenishes every four hours, whereas Stocked fuel can be paid for or given as a bonus. Supplied fuel also comes with a cap, which begins at three units, but can be increased over time. Beta-test players who expressed concerns that this system was 'pay-to-play' have been proven right, and Bandai Namco's adjustments – winning fuel through challenges, say – just aren't enough to shake the feeling that this is a cash-in.

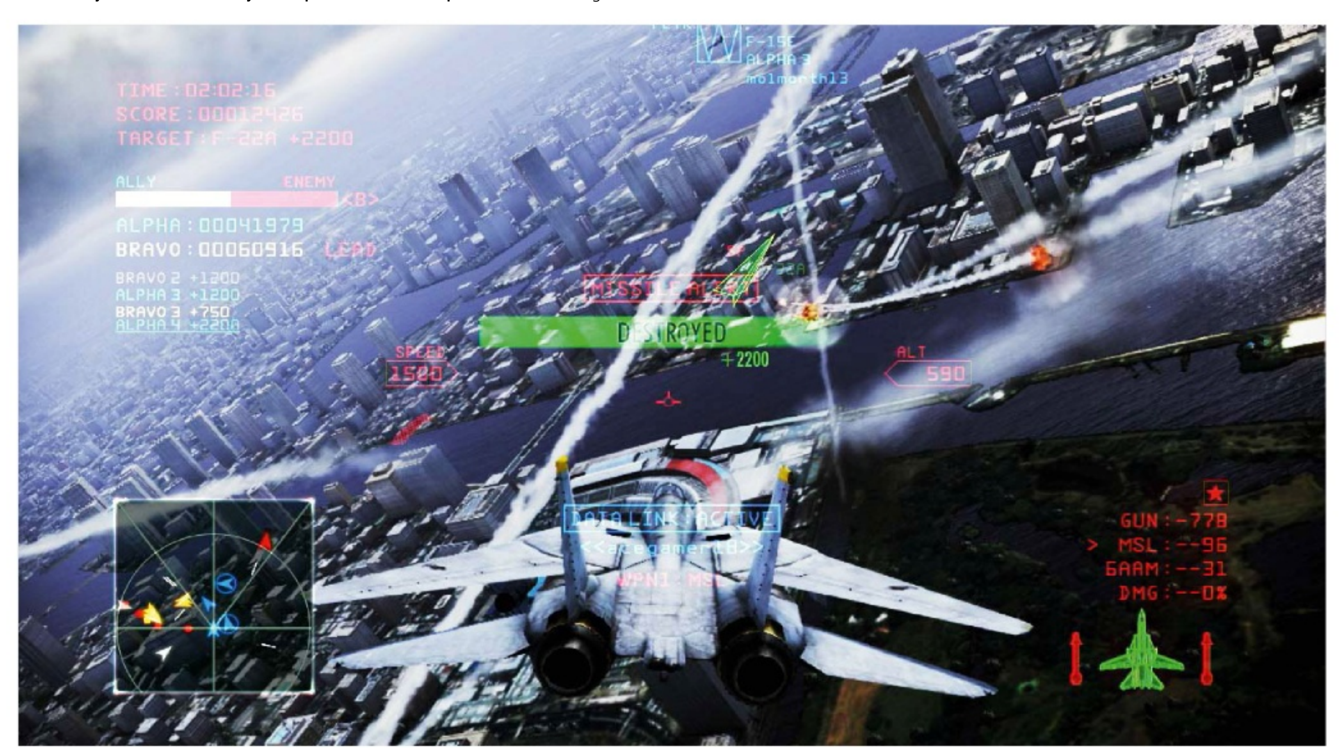
You'll only be piloting jet fighters, but at least there are lots of them. New planes, mostly real-world craft but with nods to past games, are researched as you level up, bought using in-game credits and then added to your fleet. You can have up to four customised jets at once, defining loadouts, buffs and skins, while spending time in the air levels up planes themselves, letting you spend credits on performance and defensive upgrades.

You can fly your custom planes in *Infinity*'s only multiplayer mode, which sees two teams of four pilots competing to take down the most AI enemies across five missions. Enemies have different point values, denoted by their colour on the radar, and each match is limited to just a few minutes. Special events, such as the arrival of a wing of ace pilots or the surfacing of an enemy submarine flanked by UAVs, see both teams work together to destroy the threat within a time limit, with a bonus handed to the team that delivers the killing blow. Emergency Sorties, meanwhile, are fully cooperative, but *Infinity* offers only one at launch.

More will follow, but despite what its name might suggest, *Infinity* is extremely limited, both in terms of what little content it offers and your ability to access it. Bandai Namco promises to update the game with more missions and modes – including online PvP – but its heavy-handed implementation of F2P is likely to result in clear skies above its online theatres.

4

***Ace Combat Infinity* continues the concerted avoidance of colour found in the series' pre-*Assault Horizon* instalments. In fact, *Infinity* looks considerably worse than its three-year-old predecessor in all respects**



Sniper Elite III

You'd think a stealth game shouldn't share much in common with *Mortal Kombat*, but try telling Rebellion that. *Sniper Elite III* sees the return of its predecessor's slow-mo, X-ray-vision killcams, which lovingly follow a bullet's path from barrel to bollock. When a round hits home, skulls fracture and eyeballs explode. Lungs, hearts, testicles and the bones that surround them are torn asunder by hot metal. It's shocking at first, but that soon wears off. Violence is a powerful thing, but so is the law of diminishing returns.

There is, thankfully, a lot more to *Sniper Elite III* than fracture porn. This is a game of surprising systemic complexity, one that ranks stealthy play far above running and gunning, giving you a spread of options to achieve the former and punishing attempts at the latter. Protagonist Karl Fairburne can't take much damage, while being spotted means reinforcements arrive and enemies close on his position. This is, in many ways, an old-fashioned game – you'll need bandages and medkits to refill your non-recharging health bar, and given Rebellion's miserly checkpointing, you'll quickly come to rely on a manual save system. Yet there are a few new tricks beneath the surface, too. The result is a game that's full of contradictions.

Long-range kills involve accounting for wind direction and bullet drop, though the process is simplified by Empty Lung mode. Tap R1 and the action slows down as a red diamond shows where the bullet will hit

Publisher Rebellion
Developer In-house, 505 Games
Format 360, PC, PS3, PS4 (version tested), Xbox One
Release Out now



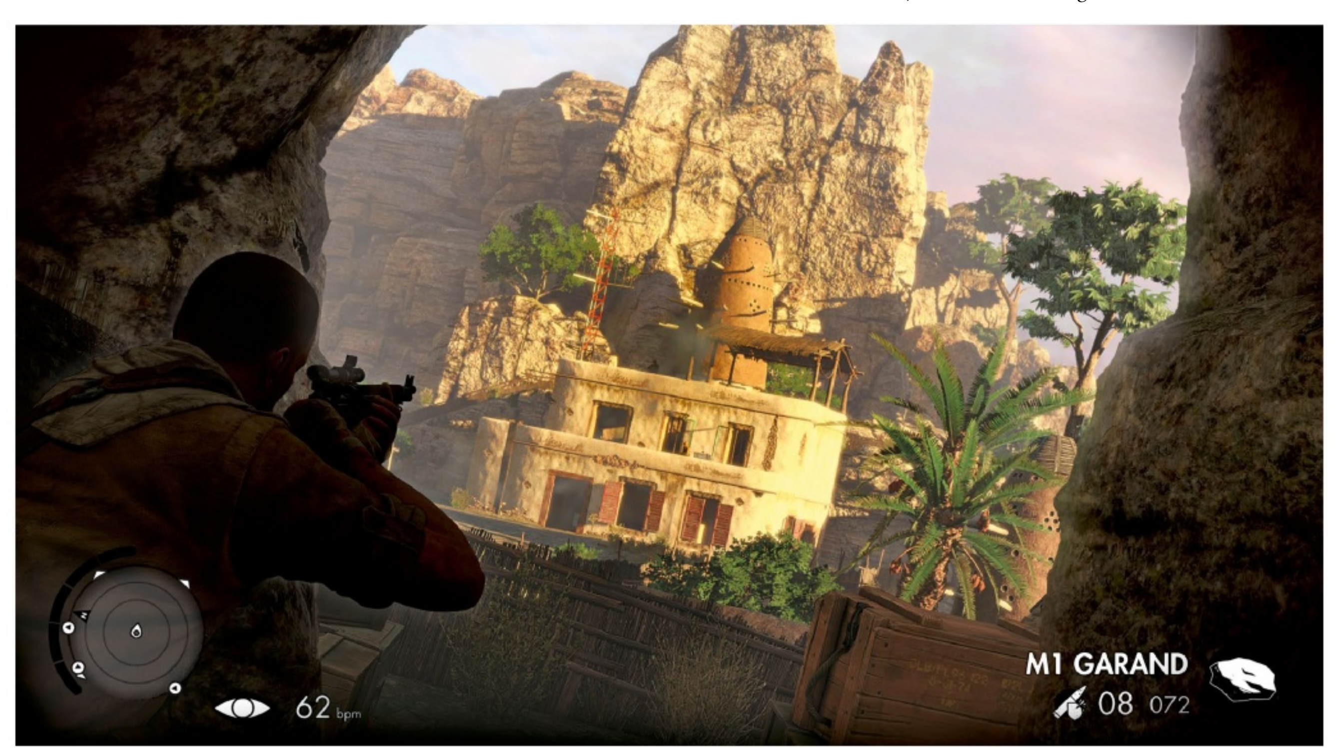
CRAP MIRROR
As tradition dictates, Fairburne is a gruff, grizzled and aloof sort in the mid-mission cinematics. When behind enemy lines, he's mute, but that's made up for by constant enemy chatter of the same quality as the rest of the game. Guards communicate in German with a distinct English twang; during cutscenes, however, they mostly speak in German-accented English. Not even Charlie Brooker – a series fan who plays a role as well as providing motion capture for several enemies – can save this.

Take *Sniper Elite III*'s use of sound, for instance. Fairburne can use ambient noise – rumbling generators, or aircraft overhead – to mask the crack of his rifle. It's smart, yet the general sound mix is anything but: with surround-sound headphones on, guards a hundred yards away and round a couple of corners speak so loudly that you'd think they were right on top of you. The AI is similarly uneven. When you're spotted, enemy troops close in at pace, flanking your position intelligently. If one stumbles across a body and can't find you, he'll give up and return to his normal route after a minute or so.

As you guide Fairburne across WWII North Africa, you'll bump up against invisible walls, fail to walk over ankle-high scenery, see tutorial text pop up 30 seconds late, have button presses ignored, and come up against a slew of bugs. We failed one mission for, apparently, shooting a general before he had retrieved crucial intel; we'd winged a guard on the other side of the arena.

Campaign missions are lengthy, packed full of optional objectives that smooth your progress, such as taking out searchlight operators or disabling vehicles. A levelling system doles out new kit for your customisable loadout, and there's co-op and online multiplayer to contend with when Fairburne's mission is complete. But content is no substitute for quality, and while *Sniper Elite III* might have made for an engaging design document, it isn't much of a game.

5







Braid

Winding back the clock to revisit Jonathan Blow's indie blockbuster

By Simon Parkin

Publisher Microsoft **Developer** Number None **Format** 360, PC **Debut** 2008

For 30 years, videogames allowed us to extend time. The clink and rattle of a fresh credit would buy you a few more minutes inside an arcade game's hostile reality. It wasn't until 2008 and *Braid*, however, that we were truly able to shift position from time's slave to its master. Now we could not only extend time but also squeeze, stretch, fiddle, scrub and manipulate it in all manner of new and unusual ways. With this power, we could undo protagonist Tim's mistimed leaps. We could carefully lift his body from the spikes on which it was impaled. We could pluck him from the jaws of a man-eating plant, or nudge him away from the path of an incoming projectile. In *Braid,* we could unpick and restitch history's tapestry in order to save and to solve.

Videogames had played with this power before. Both *Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time* and, less successfully, *Blinx* allowed us to wind the clock back a handful of seconds to take another run at a leap or to avoid getting skewered by a hitherto-unforeseen sword stab. At its most straightforward, *Braid* is a game built upon the same miracle, albeit within the context of a *Mario*-style platform game. But here, for the first time, your power isn't limited to a few snatched seconds: you can rewind an entire level back to the start, resetting the world to its initial state. Despite appearances, there is no peril here either. The monsters exist not to harm you, but to act as props in a series of temporal puzzles – obstacle courses that require time to be manipulated in order to grant passage. As such, *Braid* played with time in unprecedented ways.

The great potential of videogames is that they allow us to inhabit realities that work on unfamiliar logic and rules. Game-makers usually only dabble with this power. They ease gravity's tug so that characters can leap tall buildings in a single bound. They exaggerate physics so that punches hit harder, or explosions cause more damage and spectacle. It's rare, however, that a game world presents a wholly unfamiliar set of physical rules. With *Braid*, creator Jonathan Blow drew inspiration from Alan Lightman's Einstein's Dreams and Italo Calvino's Invisible Cities, novels that explore the idea of worlds subject to a different sets of temporal rules than our own. *Braid* became Blow's project to build such alternate realities, constructing places where time is yoked to movement (going forward when Tim walks in one direction, but backwards when he moves the other way), or certain objects are immune to time reversal.

Braid reflects both the logic and poetry of its creator, who double-majored in English Literature and Computer Science at UC Berkeley. Blow's logic is reflected in the precision with which the game's mechanics are introduced and investigated. Each of the six worlds introduces a new temporal conceit and, through a series of sub-stages, explores the idea in various ways. In one, you are given an item that slows time for anything that sits within its proximity, temporarily decelerating moving platforms or enemies as they pass close by. In another, you work through the stage alongside your previous 'selves', one of whom is added each time you rewind and create a new timeline. The ideas unfurl with elegance, revealing themselves with such clarity that it sometimes seems as if Blow uncovered, rather than invented, them.

His poetry is revealed in what many consider to be *Braid*'s schizophrenic other half, a storyline that initially appears to have little to do with the game's mechanical theme. The game's title refers to a girl's hair, ostensibly that of Tim's ex-lover, who flicked her braid at him as she turned heel and fled the relationship. Blow's interest in creative writing – a form he once claimed that he mastered only to find that he had nothing he wanted to say – is revealed through some occasionally purple prose, which apparently deals with a painful breakup, and Tim's subsequent pursuit of the girl with whom he has become obsessed.

This reading is supported by the game's aesthetic, which riffs off the familiar *Super Mario* myth, with the determined plumber pursuing the kidnapped princess. Blow incudes many of *Mario*'s props in the game's art (drawn by David Hellman), albeit aged and twisted with a sort of strange realism. Gruff-faced Goomba-alikes shuffle along the platforms, warty Piranha Plants snap ▶

from green pipes, and when Tim reaches the end of each world, a leathery bipedal dinosaur hobbles out to announce the princess must be in another castle. The game's conclusion appears to twist the *Mario* myth, revealing that the 'princess' was, in fact, fleeing from Tim's stalking.

There's another reading encouraged by the game's text, however. Mario is a blue-collar, working-class saviour, while Tim, with his pristine suit and leather briefcase, comes from a different position in society. In time, *Braid* reveals a secondary storyline behind the one about the jilted lover. Blow makes repeated and increasingly plain references to the development of the atomic bomb (at one point repeating the infamous quotation from Kenneth Bainbridge, spoken moments after the detonation of the first atomic bomb: "Now we are all sons of bitches"). During the game's memorable ending, Tim flees a scenery-consuming nuclear explosion, a pursuing wave of destruction. For many, *Braid* is the story of a man who becomes almost romantically obsessed with an extraordinary power (be it the bomb or metaphorically something forbidden and destructive), who is filled with regret when he loses control over it.

There is truth to both interpretations, as well as others, some of which Blow, in the best tradition of artists who want to encourage ongoing discussion of their work, claims are yet to be noted or divulged. For all the discussion that the game's story has inspired, most consider Blow to be a more proficient game-maker than storyteller. His tale, for all its intrigue, is opaque and often confusing. The standoffishness of his prose is also reflected in *Braid*'s puzzles. This is, after all, not a game that accommodates player expression; each puzzle has a singular solution. In most cases, the purpose of the rewind function is to go back again and again until you learn how to play the level the way Blow intended. It's telling that each puzzle rewards a player with a piece of a jigsaw. These are predestined puzzles with set solutions. You either solve the game piece by piece as intended, or you fail to.



***Braid*'s art was created by the comic-book artist David Hellman. Blow would provide rough layouts of each of the game's stages over which Hellman would draw. The characters were originally designed by *Super Meat Boy* co-creator Edmund McMillen, but Hellman later redrew them to fit with his backgrounds more harmoniously**

BLOW HAS SAID THAT MANY OF THE PUZZLES CAME TO HIM BECAUSE HE WAS ALSO THE ARCHITECT OF THE ENGINE

In this sense, the game's rhythm is close to a crossword. It's possible to move through each of the game's worlds, entering one door and exiting through the next, while solving only a handful of their puzzles. After the initial stage, you're almost never blocked from progressing. Instead, you're encouraged to return to revisit the clues you missed. But despite this apparent lenience towards players, *Braid* is not a supportive game. Blow has stated that he ignored Microsoft's pleas to include a hint system. There is no help within the game's context for those struggling to meet its challenges, which retains Blow's philosophy about only granting passage to players who demonstrate understanding, but does so at the cost of approachability.

There is an upside to this ruthless approach: those who resist the temptation



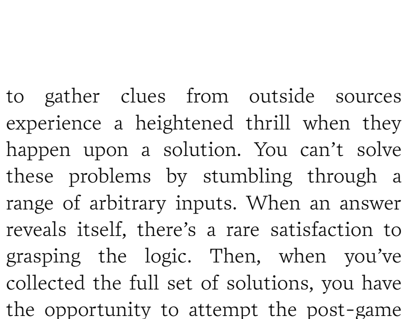


Blow has stated that the game cost $200,000 to make, leaving him $40,000 in debt at the conclusion of its development. Soon after the game's release in 2008, it became the second-best-selling title on Xbox Live Arcade, a feat that made Blow a millionaire

RIDDLE ME THIS



Following *Braid*'s launch, Blow began an earnest campaign to discourage players from using guides to solve its puzzles. His anxious advice was logical: when played with a guide, *Braid* lacks challenge. Moreover, the game is finished quickly. Like a crossword, the entirety of the game's appeal is in its solving. To encourage players to take the harder route, Blow created an 'official walkthrough' document for public download. When opened, the guide's advice to players was curt and simple: work through the puzzles at your pace. Despite his best efforts, YouTube provided easy support for anybody who became stuck on a particular conundrum.

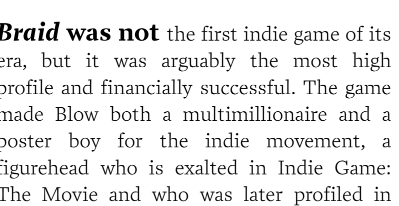


to gather clues from outside sources experience a heightened thrill when they happen upon a solution. You can't solve these problems by stumbling through a range of arbitrary inputs. When an answer reveals itself, there's a rare satisfaction to grasping the logic. Then, when you've collected the full set of solutions, you have the opportunity to attempt the post-game speedrun and thread these lessons together into a perfect chain of mastery – albeit within the bounds the designer has set.

***Braid* was not** the first indie game of its era, but it was arguably the most high profile and financially successful. The game made Blow both a multimillionaire and a poster boy for the indie movement, a figurehead who is exalted in Indie Game: The Movie and who was later profiled in The Atlantic. Superficially, this acclaim is down to the game's presentation and delivery platform. A download-only title for Microsoft's XBLA service, *Braid* has all of the trappings of a fashionable arthouse game: painterly graphics, a wistful classical soundtrack and a tiny team.

But that Blow and his game should come to symbolise the spirit of indie development is due to more than the simple luck of timing, or its style. *Braid* is a game that feels as if it could only have been created by a lone programmer and designer. Had the game's development been split between many minds, it's unlikely that its ideas would have blossomed with such focus and purity. Blow has said since that many of the puzzles came to him because he was also the architect of the game's engine. In that sense, *Braid* and Blow are a fitting team to represent what differentiates indie game development from the creative sprawl of the modern blockbuster. It's more than a matter of aesthetic, it's to do with the fundamental way in which a game is constructed.

Six years on and that definition might seem outdated. The 'indie game' has broadened out to encompass everything from the bedroom game-maker to teams that once upon a time would have been considered large. But *Braid* itself has not aged in the same way. It's retained its burnish and power, and with its playful experimentation with chronology it continues to enable us to look at our own world with fresh eyes. Moreover, *Braid*'s puzzles have stood the test of time – the one test that Blow couldn't design away. ■



The game uses licensed music tracks from Magnatune artists Cheryl Ann Fulton, Shira Kammen and Jami Sieber. Blow later admitted that he chose licensed music in order to minimise development costs









JAMES LEACH

Postcards From The Clipping Plane

Conveniently ignoring the serious side of videogame development

Just imagine this: it's the beginning of game development and anything is possible. There's a team of developers fresh from crunching on the last game and drunken awards ceremonies in which they won nothing, all waving completion bonus cheques large enough to buy them new mountain-bike brakes.

While we're imagining things, imagine this developer is indie and not tied to trying to write a sequel of the thing it just finished. Imagine, and this is really stretching things, that the team doesn't have to spend the next four months writing patches for all the things that are broken in the game it has just finished, either.

We are talking about people ready for a brand-new challenge. And fortunately for them, they work in an industry and a company where all creative ideas are valued equally, even though the lead designer and the boss are ultimately going to get their way. So it's time for sketches, designs, thoughts and mood boards from the guy whose job it apparently is to do nothing but a couple of mood boards every three years. It's time for a million meetings, too.

There is a tried-and-tested process to these meetings. Any deviation will cause the studio to close, and that means it'll have to reopen a month later in a smaller unit over the way with fewer windows. No one will get paid during this month and, worse, the boss will have to come up with another studio name, choosing a two-word moniker from the time-honoured list of colours followed by an animal name.

So, the meetings. The first thing that needs to be discussed in accordance with game industry law is good versus evil: can we play a bad guy and have him triumph over good? Since the *GTA* series, the answer has been no, but it's a meeting that has to be got past.

The next meeting is far more creative. The devs talk about all the games they played during the crunch evenings they've just finished, when playing other games was forbidden. From this, a list of things everyone likes can be drawn up, and ticks put next to the things worth ripping off. It doesn't matter whether these can fit together, or exist in a single game world – remember, we're going for creative innovation, so everything worth copying is on the table.



There's time for a brief vote to show nobody wants to work with Andy Serkis since he said Those Things about CGI

At this point, it's wise for the team to take a break for a few days. Tradition dictates our devs post Photoshopped 'up a mountain in Wales' selfies on Facebook, but it's acceptable to post pics of the babies they've inexplicably had during the crunch period, when having babies was technically banned by the studio heads. What also has to happen in this period of idleness is they must binge movies and box sets of all the TV they haven't been watching.

Once back, the team meets to list all the cool things they could rip off from the films and TV shows. This can last for an entire afternoon, but only once everyone is talking about Game Of Thrones or Breaking Bad. As before, there are no right or wrong answers. It's a meeting in which anything can be said. It's worth noting that anyone doing an impression of Walt Jr, however, will have their service terminated.

The next meeting to be tabled is more of a presentation. Every dev team has one person with a game idea they had at college and have nurtured ever since. It's usually the reason they entered the industry. Over the intervening years, this will have been refined and polished. Everyone present but the speaker will become aware how universally awful this idea is, but its proposer will be treated politely because he's the only guy who knows how to program that excellent water thing everyone likes.

There aren't many more concept meetings to have now. The next one is about whether to do a supernatural game. The answer is simply no, followed by a list of Japanese-type games that have exhausted the entire genre. Since this is a short meeting, it's fine to add a point about characters and casting. Some neckbeard will want to make the protagonist a Manic Pixie Dream Girl, despite the fact that this hasn't been a credible thing for more than five years. And there's time for a brief vote to indicate that nobody wants to work with Andy Serkis since he said Those Things about CGI.

The timing of the last blue-sky meeting is crucial. The head of studio will stress how useful the ideas have been, and how now is the time for something groundbreaking. He'll also mention the sales figures of the last game are pretty good, and how all the fresh thinking that's been done can easily be incorporated into, well, it's not really a sequel, it's more of a familiar wrapper. It would be unwise to stray from the core values, though, but thanks for the input. Back to your desks and we need to capitalise on our current success, so we'll need you to go ahead and come in every weekend, because we're going beta in spring.

James Leach is a BAFTA Award-winning freelance writer whose work features in games and on television and radio

Illustration **box-kite-curve.com**


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